Prologue

“Now then...”

She lowered her voice to speak confidentially. The woman, who was wearing a navy blue outfit, leaned forward, causing the sofa to creak. ‘Now then,’ she repeated once again, “Please report the contents of the investigation.”

“Yes. —Full name: Shibuya Kazuya. Occupation: Head of ‘Shibuya Psychic Research’. According to the information found through the best efforts of this investigator, his birthday is September 19th. Currently, he is seventeen years old.”

“You don’t need to say ‘best efforts’ and so forth. Please report only the facts, investigator. —If he’s seventeen, then he must be a student?”

“He doesn’t seem to go to school.”

The woman crossed her legs. After briefly looking up to the ceiling in thought, she said, “Virgo, huh? Virgo is the worst personality.”

For some reason, she decisively declared that.

“It is, isn’t it? According to my observations, his blood type seems to be either A or O type.”

“Seems like it, right?”

When the woman nodded, the man, who had been silently listening to the conversation, cut in.

“I heard A. But, that’s sort of... unrelated, isn’t it?”

The woman glared at the man.

“Observers do not speak. —Investigator, please continue.”

“Yes. His address is unknown and his home phone number is also unknown.”

“Complete secrecy, huh? Family?”

“It’s unknown. But, it seems there’s no doubt he has parents, right? His father is a university professor.”

“Hometown?”

“That’s also unknown. However, since he doesn’t know a lot of detail about Tokyo’s geography, he doesn’t seem to have been born and raised in Tokyo.”

“I see… How is the financial health of the office?”

“I don’t exactly know, but… I don’t think it’s profitable. There isn’t a large amount of work, and the request fee also isn’t a large sum.”

“In spite of there not being work, there’s a lot of staff. An assistant and… two part-timers. What the heck, where does that much money come from?”

“I don’t know. It’s strange, right? So to speak... isn’t it that, ‘There is where there is.’”

The man, who had been listening to the conversation in indifference, lightly laughed. The woman glared at the man a second time. After that, she leaned forward once more.

“The amount of work isn’t a lot, right? Well then, what does he do on a daily basis?”

“He reads books, looks at maps, *etc.* He’s gone traveling at present.”

“Ah. He’s traveling now, huh? Where did he go?”

“If I remember correctly, Tōhoku.”

“He didn’t go for...hot springs, did he?”

“What? Absolutely not.”

“What else? What about the assistant? Did you find out his real name?”

“Lin Koujo seems to be his real name. He’s originally from Hong Kong. Other than that, his profile is unknown. His address is also unknown, but Shibuya Kazuya seems to live within a distance where you can hear if you knock on the wall.”

The woman grew silent. Before long, she raised her voice hysterically.

“Then, what?! In short, nothing I don’t know, isn’t that what you’re saying?!”

“I know, but I can’t do anything about that...”

“This good for nothing.”

“It can’t be helped—! It’s not my fault! You guys… ”

I unintentionally yelled in earnest.

“You guys, Naru’s secrecy is bad!”

***

Tokyo, Shibuya, Dōgenzaka. ‘Shibuya Psychic Research.’

I, aka Taniyama Mai, stood firmly in the middle of the fashionable office, breathing heavily. I was coldly scrutinized by the man (Takigawa Houshou, originally a monk from Mt. Koya) and woman (Matsuzaki Ayako, a miko). And in spite of me being a sixteen year old girl who out blooms even a flower, too.

Yes! Naru is bad, you guys.

Shibuya Kazuya, head of ‘Shibuya Psychic Research’. His appearance is exceptionally good while his personality is exceptionally bad. Haughty, arrogant and narcissistic, no question about it. He’s called ‘Naru’ because of his narcissistic personality.

Why is he so eager to conceal everything!

My shoulders trembled angrily. Taka (Takahashi Youko, work colleague), having watched from afar, patted me on the back.

“Whoa, whoa. The director’s secrecy probably isn’t something recent.”

“But—”

Well, just remembering makes me angry.

Originally, what started all of this was a woman who came in the Spring. That person, Mori Madoka, was acquainted with Naru and Lin-san. That is to say, an acquaintance. In other words, isn’t it true that she knows everything we don’t know? Although I wanted to ask a mountain of questions, she returned home

without telling almost anything.

So, this had sparked my curiosity. No one knew anything about Naru until Mori-san came. However, when the person who knows everything comes and no information can be gained from them, it results in frustration.

—Thus, in order to satisfy my curiosity, I began working to gather information. Knowing Ayako planned the same process of information gathering, the two of us have been collaborating since the rainy season, however, summer had come without us discovering a single thing.

If you ask questions and are refused answers, they can be discovered through tailing, but in the end, the answers were few.

“Are you also interested in me?”

That— guy—!

Yeah right, why would I? I mean… I mean… It was merely genuine, intellectual curiosity about what kind of secrets Naru has hidden since he’s so keen to hide everything, not because of any particular romantic feelings or emotions. “Interested”? Don’t be ridiculous. You’re completely conceited.

...No, to tell the truth, I was a little interested (blush), but when it comes to this, I have no intention of admitting it at any cost. Taniyama Mai is not so straight-forward as to admit, “Yes, that’s right,” when, “are you also interested in me?” is asked.

“But, I think Mai is bad, too.”

After Taka said that, I turned to look at her.

“Why?”

“Do you think the boss will simply tell you what he’s hiding?”

..oh.

“Doesn’t that mean trying to figure it out is unreasonable? Even ordinary people have one complaint about another party. Let alone, since you’re dealing with the boss, don’t you think the obvious response to a hundred complaints is a hundred sarcasms?”

“...That—that’s true, but...”

depressed

“Well, I also understand Matsuzaki-san’s and Mai’s feelings. But, if not done in moderation, it may result in regret.”

“There would be regret.”

Taka looked in Senpai’s direction. Senpai (Kasai Chiaki, a psychic girl in a slump) lightly shrugged her shoulders, “He’s hiding, so doesn’t that mean don’t look?”

“...Yeah.”

“The story says, if you forcibly look at the one who said, ‘Don’t look’, they might return to the mountain.”

“What… is that?”

“The Crane Wife. It means the other cannot help here anymore if their identity is discovered. Don’t you think that’s it?”

“No way...”

“But, you mustn’t declare things, right? For example, the boss is a wealthy heir and his parents oppose, so he hides and runs the office secretly. I think it’s quite possible that, after Mai finds his house and carelessly visits, everything will be leaked to his parents and he will have to close the office.”

“Madoka-san had said they don’t particularly oppose.”

Chiaki-senpai lightly sighed.

“As an example of the story. Is it okay for the boss to be gone?”

“Well... it’s what he wanted.”

When I said this, senpai sternly pointed.

“If nothing else, such a good part-time job won’t come again.”

...ugh.

“Wouldn’t you be worried?”

“...I’d be worried.”

After all, I am a self-supporting student. If I were to lose this outside the norm part-time pay, it would be terribly painful.

Bou-san, who was listening to our conversation with interest, cut in.

“Is the part-time pay here good?”

Taka nodded.

“Yeah. Better than the general public. Even I, as the secretary. Mai is better because she’s sort of an investigator. On average, an office lady gets much less.”

Yeah. When I go on an investigation, the hourly wage is for twenty-four hours, and in addition to that, I receive a risk allowance.

Bou-san tilted his head in confusion.

“Something wrong?”

“No. Before, when I asked why he hired Mai, Naru-bou said, ‘I hear she’s hard working and it’s cheap.’”

Taka also tilted her head in confusion.

“It isn’t cheap, right?”

“Yeah. I’m free to increase my part-time hours. And since the salary is hourly, when I don’t have enough money, all I have to do is increase my hours.”

Actually, I’m trying to increase my income, so I work in the office as much as possible when there’s not an investigation.

Ayako made a disgruntled noise.

“What’s this? You have such a sweet part-time job? Will you also get paid for talking to this idiot?”

“I mean, even though I want to, there’s currently no work.”

Looking at Taka as I said this, Taka nodded.

Bou-san tilted his head even more.

“It doesn’t seem like such difficult work.”

“It’s difficult when we go on investigations.”

If you're not careful, your life is cut short.

"What about ordinarily?"

Hearing Bou-san, Taka and I looked at each other. Taka pointed at me.

"If a client comes to the office, Mai keeps them occupied."

I also pointed towards Taka.

"Taka does office work. She organizes purchased books, does odd jobs, and makes tea."

"What about right now?"

"Mai is supervising while Lin-san is on lunch break. Even though she wants to keep occupied, she can't since there currently isn't a client."

"Taka is doing the morning cleaning of the office. And since both Lin-san and Naru are gone, no chores have been requested, and there also aren't any purchased books to organize today. Our psychic colleagues have come to visit, so she made tea."

Bou-san rested his chin on his hand with a serious expression.

"The phone rang repeatedly for some time."

"But the answering machine got it, didn't it?"

"An answering machine does the job, but you don't answer the phone?"

"Actually, yeah—"

"That's right—"

Taka and I nodded.

"We're not supposed to answer the phone. That's what we were told."

"That's right. We're also not supposed to touch the post. The mail-box downstairs requires a key, and only the boss and Lin-san have the key."

"Speaking of which, were not even supposed to clean the boss' office. It shouldn't be entered without permission."

"Furthermore, the financial matters are also no-touch."

Bou-san and Ayako amicably held their heads between their hands.

“What kind of financial sense is Naru using?”

“Right? If it was me, I wouldn’t pay for such part-time work.”

“What—”

“Naturally. The point is, right now, aren’t you just drinking cups of tea in an air-conditioned office?”

That— that might be so.

Taka puffed her cheeks.

“Because the boss said it was okay.”

“Right. He said that.”

“In exchange for a comfortable job, we also face difficulties with human relations.”

“Right. Even the child before me certainly didn’t last with it.”

When I said that, Taka and Chiaki-senpai looked at me blankly.

“? What?”

“Child before?”

“Yeah. Naru said that when he invited me to work part-time. He said, ‘The child before quit.’”

“But, didn’t Madoka-san say, ‘That the pair even hired someone is surprising.’”

Huh? Now that you mention it, she had said something like that…

Ayako tilted her head.

“Was there really a ‘child before?’ You usually wouldn’t quit such a sweet and comfortable part-time job. No matter how bad the pair’s personalities, don’t they practically hole themselves up in the boss’ office and resource room respectively and not come out?”

“That… that’s right.”

Bou-san crossed his arms.

“Worse is the management of his money. There aren’t that many clients and most are declined. How could he set up this lavish office and the like in this prime location with that work style? On top of that, he has two part-timers for hardly any work. And in addition, the part-time pay is good.”

“But, doesn’t Naru think it’s inexpensive hard work? It’s like I thought, his family is definitely wealthy. So isn’t his sense of money different from ours?”

“Although there are also rich university professors, it’s still not as lucrative a business as to say, ‘definitely.’ ”

“Well, it could be a family originally from a wealthy house. Surely, the son’s upbringing is the cause of such an arrogant personality. Uh-huh.”

“The truly rich are gentle and calm.”

“You know, that’s a case of to each his own...”

As that was being said, the door opened and Lin-san returned.

Overlooking the inside of the office, Lin-san seemed to very lightly nod in the direction of Bou-san and Ayako.

“Sorry to bother you.”

Ayako said as she leaned forward.

“So, Lin-san. Was there a part-time worker before Mai?”

“No, none.”

Lin-san said this as he pulled two envelopes, which seemed to contain journals, from the mail he held in his arm and handed them to Taka. It’s Taka’s job to collect the cards removed from the table of contents of the journals.

...but, there was no one?

“No one?”

“Yes.”

Said expressionlessly, Lin-san went towards the resource room. On the way, he signaled to Chiaki-senpai with his eyes. For now, Senpai is PK training with Lin-san. For a long time it had passed, but recently, there are visible signs of a revival of spoon bending.

Bou-san muttered quietly.

“What is Naru-bou thinking?”

Right, right.

Taka spoke uncertainly.

“I wonder if it’s possibly like this. He acts bad, but at his core he’s a nice guy.”

“N-No way!”

No, to be honest, it’s not that I don’t think so, but like...

‘Anyway,’ Ayako issued in a sharp tone.

“Maii. Didn’t you, in fact, say that he was actually really kind?”

I glanced at her coldly.

“No way...”

...No, not at all.

Hmmm. These circumstances only deepen the confusion...

Chapter 1 - House by the Cove

1

Then after about an hour, Naru, the center of the confusion, returned. As usual, dressed in black from head to toe, his looks alone are excessively good. Although black clothing is stifling in the summer, Naru looks strangely cool wearing it.

Like he always is when he returns from his travel of an unknown purpose, Naru was in a remarkably bad mood. When he saw the two outsiders in the office waving, he openly frowned.

“What do you want today?”

His voice was thoroughly cruel. Despite this, neither Ayako, nor Bou-san, seemed to have answers.

“Well, I was in the neighborhood.”

“That’s right. I was just shopping—”

Naru gazed coldly.

“Every time with the same excuse, you can’t get enough of it, can you?”

“Ahahaha—”

...whoaa. He’s in an unexpectedly foul mood today.

Taka and I were already attempting to flee from enemy fire on account of letting sleeping dogs lie, however Ayako was as resilient as ever.

“Hey, Naru. I heard an interesting story.”

“And you want me to listen?”

Ayako leaned her face towards Naru, who sunk back on the sofa.

“Right. I heard there wasn’t a ‘child before.’”

Naru looked at Ayako with a questioning look.

“Even though you told Mai ‘the child before quit,’ in truth, there wasn’t a ‘child before’. Why would you tell her that? Surprisingly, you’re kind to Mai, aren’t you?”

Naru was expressionless. While directing a cold gaze, he spoke without hesitation.

“Are you jealous?”

Ayako reddened noticeably.

“Wait a—! Who, me?!”

Of course. Ayako is no match for Naru.

“It’s because I have a kind nature.”

“Yeah, right!”

“Oh, it doesn’t appear so? Don’t I always kindly listen to your inane conversation?”

Ayako put on a smile, her face twitching.

“Aren’t you actually interested in Mai?”

...ummmmmm.

In response, Naru smiled sweetly. Like a flower, I’d like to say, but it’s disturbing since his eyes aren’t smiling.

“I’ll offer you a denial. Because it’s pathetic when you get sick with too much shock. Aren’t I kind?”

This—this narcissist.

Looking at Ayako, as one would expect, she was struck speechless, her mouth agape. Then Naru said, “Mai.”

“Y-yes!”

“There seems to be a customer. Please receive them.”

When I looked back in haste, the figure of a person could be seen peering inside from the opposite side of the door. I hurried to the door while inwardly breaking into a cold sweat.

***

At the entrance stood a man of about twenty years of age and a girl around kindergarten age.

“Yes?”

I switched to a business smile as I opened the door.

“Excuse me, I don’t know how I should say this, but… you’re spiritualists, right?”

Pulling the hand of the girl, he came into the office. He had a very quiet voice.

“We’re a little different from spiritualists. Do you have a request?”

He nodded, then looked down at the girl.

“I would like you to examine this child.”

The girl was wearing a shirt with a sailor collar, and her neck was bandaged.

“Well...”

I looked back at Naru. There are some spiritualists that will treat illnesses, but in the case of ‘Shibuya Psychic Research’, that sort of thing is outside our area of expertise. Furthermore, in our case, we’re very different from spiritualists.

As I was thinking that, Naru frankly replied, “I think you should go to the hospital if you need treatment for an illness.”

Being said as such, the man’s eyes grew wide a little bit in surprise. Then, he gently smiled.

“I agree....but, I don’t think it’s an ordinary illness.”

Naru stood up.

“Is there an illness?”

“No.”

“First of all, you should consult a doctor.”

Naru’s voice seemed blatantly irritated. Hearing Naru, the girl looked up at the man.

“I hate hospitals.”

He smiled.

“It’s alright. We’re not going to the hospital.”

“Is this a hospital?”

“It’s different, Hazuki. You don’t smell medicine, do you?”

The girl nodded, but was still uneasy. She firmly clung to his arm as she looked around the office.

“Naru-chan.”

The one who interrupted was Bou-san.

“It’s alright if we examine her, right? In particular, it won’t take long, so there’s no reason to be so impatient, is there?”

Glancing at Bou-san, Naru lightly sighed. He offered the two the sofa.

“Please sit. —Takahashi-san, please serve tea.”

***

The man’s name was Yoshimi Akifumi-san. The girl’s was Yoshimi Hazuki-chan. She’s his niece. After introducing himself, he began to unwind the bandage that was around Hazuki-chan’s neck. From beneath the gauze appeared a sort of red eczema on her throat. It was simply a red line straight across the middle of her throat. Blood lightly seeped out of the sore skin.

“It looks like a skin disease.”

When Naru said that, Akifumi-san turned Hazuki-chan sideways.

“It’s around her entire neck.”

True to his words, the line went around her neck. A band of eczema, the width of about a centimeter, was around her neck. It was somewhat creepy. It looked like a wound. As though to cut the neck directly horizontal.

“It doesn’t seem painful at all, and it seems there’s no itch.”

“It’s not a rash from something?”

Akifumi-san shook his head ‘no’.

“If it was only that, I would have taken her to the hospital, but it’s also on her back.”

After he said so, Akifumi-san turned to Hazuki-chan.

“Hazuki, excuse me.”

After speaking, he opened Hazuki-chan’s shirt and dropped it from her shoulders. Looking at her small white back, I unconsciously spoke aloud.

“What… is this?”

Similar to the eczema that was on her neck, there was a line on her back. Something like this can’t possibly be a skin disease.It looked like nothing but characters. As if written with a brush, there were the kanji, ‘喘月院落獄童女.’

“...that’s terrible.”

It was Bou-san who said that in a low voice.

“What?”

“This is… a Kaimyou, isn’t it?

“Kaimyou, isn’t that a name given to a dead person?”

Bou-san made an unusually serious expression.

“Right…. this guy is malicious.”

“Malicious?”

“‘喘月’ means the foolishness of fearing something too much. ‘落獄’ would mean descend into hell. —Yoshimi-san, please dress the young lady.”

Descend into hell? What kind of Kaimyou is that?

“‘童女’ is given to girls. It’s a Kaimyou someone made with malicious intent. — It means, ‘This foolish child will descend into hell.’”

...this foolish child…

“‘月’ in ‘喘月’ is probably taken from the character in ‘葉月(Hazuki).’ This is a Kaimyou for this child.”

2

It was the evening of the following day when we arrived at the Yoshimi house, which was in Noto.

In the end, it was decided that Bou-san and Ayako would accompany us, so as usual, we crossed the simmering Japanese archipelago in two cars. Sheesh, it was a nauseating long journey.

The Yoshimi house was on a cape overlooking the Sea of Japan. From the road along the coast, a narrow side road extended through the forest to the seaside. Entering the road, an impressive building of Japanese construction immediately appeared. This was the Yoshimi house, a Japanese-style restaurant, which Akifumi-san's family runs.

Akifumi-san, who had come back the previous day on an airplane, welcomed us and we were guided to the main building where the family lives. In the main building, which is connected to the restaurant by a corridor, was a tatami mat room in the very back.

In there, an old woman was sitting on a futon waiting.

"Grandmother, they've arrived."

Saying so, Akifumi-san lead us into the tatami mat room.

"This is my grandmother."

She was an old woman like a small guardian deity of children. She neatly placed her hands on top of the futon and deeply bowed her head.

"My name is Yoshimi Yae. I humbly beg you to look into our case."

The grandmother is the actual requester— Akifumi-san and Hazuki-chan were the ones who came to the office of 'Shibuya Psychic Research.'

"In truth, I should have gone to make the request, but as you can see, my

health is somewhat impaired, so my grandson was sent as my proxy. I think even this was impolite, however, please pardon it.”

After Akifumi-san introduced us to his grandmother, there came a calm seeming man and a woman wearing a kimono who waited with tea. The man was Akifumi-san’s father Yoshimi Taizou-san, and the woman was his mother Yoshimi Hiroe-san.

The pair politely greeted us, and Naru lightly nodded in return.

“—I’d like to hear the details of the request again from grandmother.”

The grandmother nodded, pursing her mouth.

“...Where should I begin?”

Slightly tilting her head, she began talking.

“You’ll probably think this is foolish, but this house is cursed. A few days ago, my husband passed away...”

“My condolences.”

“No. He lived a long life. ...At any rate, there is a disquieting legend in the house of Yoshimi. It is said that accidents occur whenever there is a change of ownership...”

The grandmother frowned after saying this.

“It was also true in the previous generation— when my father passed away and my husband took over the house. After the death of the previous head, corpses from the family began appearing one after another. Gathered in a big house, relatives had been living merrily, then just like that the number of people had decreased and the house was empty.”

“Is that type of thing also happening now...?”

When Naru asked, the grandmother nodded.

“Yes. It was the same thing when the house was ceded to the previous generation from the generation before. Although, I don’t remember much since I was young at the time. However, among my six siblings, I alone survived. Because of that, I did not become anxious. Actually, that eczema began to form

on Hazuki immediately in response to my husband's death and in less than one week, it has become as it is now. Considering this, it doesn't seem like an ordinary case. With regards to the bruises on her neck as well as the Kaimyou on her back, it seems as if someone is saying they'll cut off Hazuki's head."

Saying so, the old woman fixed her gaze on Naru.

"Just as I had thought there was no option but to rely on people from another profession, I received a referral to you by a guest named Ohashi-sama."

Ohashi-san was the man who came with the request of the previous incident.

While Naru took notes, he said,

"I'd like to hear about when the predecessor, your father, died. When was it?"

"It was thirty-two years prior to now."

"Several people seem to have passed away, but do you remember the number and the causes of death?"

The grandmother nodded.

"There were eight people from this house. The five youngest of the seven children of this house, the oldest grandchild, my cousin, and my uncle. Half died in accidents, and the rest from illnesses with unknown causes."

I looked around the Japanese-style room, which had begun to darken. There was a large Buddhist family altar by the grandmother's bedside. Eight people from within the family. The heavy number of eight.

"From this house —that is to say, there are people who died in addition to the family?"

When Naru asked, the grandmother nodded.

"Two restaurant customers, in accidents..."

When Naru looked down at his notebook to brood, Akifumi-san's mother Hiroe-obasan, who had been silently sitting beside the futon, spoke up.

"Mother, wouldn't it be better to tell them everything?"

The grandmother looked down. Naru stared back at Hiroe-san.

“My mother… is worried whether all of you will return from here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Three spiritualists died.”

‘I see,’ Bou-san muttered quietly.

“We invited two people from a spiritualist company, however, when they began their prayer, they soon died in accidents. The person we also invited after that died in an accident, too.”

When Hiroe-obasan said this, the grandmother nodded while still looking down.

“We would very much like your help, but considering the risk, it’s unreasonable...”

Bou-san interrupted Hiroe-obasan.

“If it’s too dangerous, we’ll desist and leave. We understand what’s involved. However, I’m not so cowardly that I’ll leave without seeing what I’m up against.”

“...Thank you.”

Bou-san smiled at Hiroe-obasan, who completely bowed her head.

“However, Naru-chan, it’ll be troublesome if customers are also in danger.”

Naru nodded. He spoke to Hiroe-obsan,

“Right now, are there any customers in the shop?”

“There aren’t any here. The restaurant has been closed since my father died. Mother...”

Hiroe-obsan stared at the grandmother.

“She absolutely insisted. Employees were also asked to take a vacation after the funeral ended. Only the family is in this building now.”

“I think that’s a sensible action.”

Naru nodded lightly. Then,

“Have you experienced any incidents, or seen anything strange?”

The one to reply was Akifumi-san.

“After grandfather’s funeral, it started with the death of grandmother’s hill myna, and over about three days, all the birds and dogs we had raised died. There were the two canary birds my niece had raised and the three dogs. The birds died in their cages, but the dogs were found washed up on the shore.”

Wow…

“Other than that?”

Akifumi-san looked at his mother. Hiroe-obsan replied, “Some of the employees said they saw a ghost in part of the restaurant. It was peeking into a room from the window.”

“Is it a definite location?”

“No. I think it was perhaps the cove side room, but...”

“Cove side room?”

Hiroe-obsan nodded.

“I think you’ll understand when we show you around afterwards, however… since there’s only the cove side, it’s a strange location for someone to peek in from outside... ”

‘I see,’ Naru muttered as he closed his notebook.

“For the time being, we’ll decide where to put the equipment. Did you prepare a room?”

Akifumi-san stood up.

“Certainly. I will guide you.”

3

We walked in succession down a long corridor following Akifumi-san.

Walking in the shop's corridor, we went down a straight hallway and turned one corner. There were white walls on both sides, and lattice doors lined up here and there.

"Here it is."

Akifumi-san stopped and opened a lattice door. Behind the lattice door, there was ordinary entryway.

"Unfortunately, it isn't a Western-style room."

Akifumi-san opened the sliding front door. It was three continuous rooms. It went immediately into a small four tatami mat sized room. Behind that was an eight tatami mat sized room. Additionally, another eight tatami mat sized room could be seen through an open sliding door on the left.

"It's *huge!*"

Ayako cheered. In front of the two side-by-side eight tatami mat rooms was a paper sliding door that opened both ways. Akifumi-san opened it, and beyond was a wide veranda. Simple, Ryokan-style tables and chairs were placed there, although the ones here were three times as wide. It had the overall appearance of a simple wooden floored room.

"It's fine if the sliding doors are removed. It's a room where customers stay, but will it work?"

Akifumi-san asked Naru, who was overlooking the room. There are a number of beautifully made low tables placed against the wall, which seem a little too good for placing equipment on.

"It's more than enough."

“It’s small on the inside, but there is a bathroom. In addition to this room, we’ve prepared the rooms on both sides, so please use them for rest.”

“Thank you.”

While casting a side glance at Naru, who lightly bowed his head, I approached the window of the veranda. When it’s this wide and empty, I feel like wandering aimlessly. Looking out the window, I raised my voice. It was a superb view.

“Amaazing!”

Under the window was a small round cove. In front of the window, the opposite shore of the cliff could be seen nearby. The cove directly below looked very deep. The entrance to the sea was narrow and there was also no crossing. The thick, dark colored water was hauntingly calm.

“So, this is the cove side room?”

I understood. Certainly, it would be abnormal to see a person from outside this window. This room is built so that it projects from the cliff facing the cove. There is nothing under the window until the surface of the water. The distance is approximately four floors, or perhaps more.

“Do you understand now?”

Without noticing, Akifumi-san had appeared next to me. But it wasn’t just Akifumi-san. Everyone was looking out from the window.

“Yes, I understand. It’s impossible to look in from outside.”

“That’s right.”

“This cove, can you swim in it?”

“If you’re good at swimming. It’s very deep.”

“Ah, indeed?”

“If you want to swim, you can swim at the beach on the opposite side.”

Akifumi-san pointed back.

The opposite side… hmm, I can’t quite grasp it well.

The last time we went to a haunted house, the house was really large, and I

would become frightened when I got lost. Though this house is smaller, it seems wide enough to get lost in. As might be expected from a Japanese-style restaurant, there are many rooms, and corridors that bend back and forth. I've barely been able to comprehend the fact that we're in the restaurant rather than the main building. I wouldn't like to make a floor plan again…

Perhaps thinking the same thing, Naru asked, "Yoshimi-san, is there a floor plan of the building?"

"I think there is. I'll bring it afterwards."

Bou-san gave a wry smile.

"That would be helpful."

Akifumi-san smiled.

"Since it's not such a complicated building, I think you'll become familiar with it immediately."

"I hope that's so. Incidentally, I'd be happy if there's also a map of the building's surroundings."

When Bou-san said this, Akifumi-san smiled and raised his right hand.

"Please make a circle with your right thumb and index finger."

"An OK mark?"

"That's right. The circle is the cove. Where the thumb and index finger join is the entrance of the cave. The shop is around the base of the index finger. The opposite shore is where the thumb appears opposite now. The garden over there has a tea house."

Hmmm. I stared at my hand.

"From the place around the wrist, the main building is where you enter from the road towards the index finger and the shrine is where you enter towards the thumb."

"There's a shrine?"

"Yes, right next door. The middle finger is the beach. A small fishing port is on the far point."

Ah, I see. It isn't simple.

"And there is a small cave on the part of the nail of the index finger."

"A cave?"

"Yes. It's a marine erosion cave. Waves hollow out the cliff and a cave is made. It's only from the pointing part of the fingernail, it's missing from the cove."

"Amaazing. Can we see the cave?"

"Yes. Since today is too late, I'll show you tomorrow if that's alright with you."

Hooray. Exciting.

"But Yoshimi-san,"

Bou-san raised his voice.

"I realize the building is splendid and the location is good, but is a restaurant really profitable in the middle of nowhere?"

Indeed. The town we passed through was by no means large, and this place is on the outskirts of town.

"We're a little different from an ordinary restaurant. If I told you it's a member's only restaurant, would you understand?"

Oh, is there such a thing?

"Amaazing. Isn't this great for you, Mai and Bou-san."

Ayako put her hand on my shoulder.

"What?"

"You certainly wouldn't be able to come to a place like this in your entire life. Aren't you lucky to have this lucrative job?"

After all, I am a poor person.

"Just what are you implying with that, Ayako?"

"Ah, I can seize this chance to marry into a rich family. Hohoho."

This— this woman.

"Um..."

“Hmph. There’s a charm woman and children don’t understand.”

“Then, why don’t you hurry? I think it’s too late after you pass your eve.”

“Not yet! There’s still time before my eve!”

“It’ll pass by while you’re speaking so ambitiously.”

“Well, I’m easy.”

“Is that in terms of what a lover is allowed to do?”

“Not cute!”

“Even being loved by Ayako is just creepy.”

—To say such a thing. Sorry, it was bad. Akifumi-san’s shoulders trembled. When our eyes met, he made an apologetic expression.

“...I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Please don’t overstrain yourself by laughing too much.”

After all, we're a pair of stand-up comedians.

Ayako suddenly pointed a finger at Akifumi-san.

“That’s right. How old are you, Yoshimi-san?”

Akifumi-san had a blank look.

“I’ll be twenty soon.”

Hehe, he’s her junior. That’s unfortunate, Ayako.

When I was laughing with all my might, an unparalleled ruthless voice sprang from behind.

“Mai! How long are you going to play around!”

Uh-ohh. Boss is angry. Work, work.

4

Akifumi-san helped me carry the large amount of equipment to the base.

“Put the equipment in the center of the shop. Bou-san and Matsuzaki-san, go to Hazuki-chan. For the time being, prepare talismans to ensure her safety.”

Yeah, yeah. Carry the camera and connect the video. To the thermography and the vibrometer and the infrared radar and all the rest of the measuring instruments.

“Somehow, you don’t seem very much like spiritualists.”

Akifumi-san said while he carried equipment into the empty room.

“Yes. Please call us ghost hunters. Excuse me, could you please grab the cable with the yellow tape on it?”

“So, you also handle this kind of machinery, Taniyama-san? —Um, cable?”

“It’s a cord. —Somehow I have a simple connection. The majority of it is still gibberish to me.”

“I feel even a simple connection is incredible. I’m not very good with machinery.”

“Not very good?”

“When I touch machines too much they seem to break. When face to face with machinery, I’m the type that gets nervous.”

Ah, I see.

“Aki...”

fumi-san, I started to say and quickly covered my mouth.

“I don’t mind going by Akifumi.”

He gave me a smile, but still, to call a man by his given name after being

acquainted for such a short time is a little...

“I’m— I’m sorry. All the family members are ‘Yoshimi-san’, it was unintentional...”

“Please, don’t worry about it. Because even without the large number of people, it’s confusing.”

“Then excuse me, Akifumi-san. You said you’re twenty years old, are you a college student?”

“Yes. I go to the University of Tokyo.”

“Oh, so that means you don’t usually live here, right?”

“That’s right. But I try to come back to visit as much as possible during holidays.”

“Do you help in the shop still?”

Akifumi-san smiled and shook his head.

“My grandmother gets lonely. Since the family members are too busy with the shop.”

“Eeeh. Do all the people of the house work in the shop?”

“That’s right. But my youngest elder brother is a government worker.”

“Youngest elder brother— does that mean you have two or more brothers?”

“Two brothers and two sisters. I’m the youngest of five siblings.”

“Five… that’s a lot of people.”

Akifumi-san gave a somewhat mixed smile.

“If you die a lot, you have to have a lot of people or your house will become extinct.”

“Hmm... and along with your parents and grandmother?”

“Plus, my oldest brother and sister have children with their spouses. Three children in all. My brother has two children, and my sister has one child. Hazuki is the youngest child of my brother.”

shock

“That— that many people all live here?”

“Except me.”

I looked at my hands and counted on my fingers.

“Thirteen people in all? That’s impressive.”

Akifumi-san gave a pained smile.

“Nevertheless, if eight people die, not even half will remain.”

I thought this to be an unpleasant story. This was a cursed house where a large number of the family die. As such, a lot of damage is caused. And so as to not become extinct, the house produces a lot of children. It may be because I have no house or family, but that feels very wrong. It’s as though the children are tools to keep the house going. The parents will of course love the children, but I wonder what percentage of the love will be love for the human being.

Akifumi-san bowed his head a little.

“...I’m sorry. It’s a dark conversation.”

“No, it’s— it’s I who should say so.”

“Taniyama-san, what about your family?”

“Oh. I’m on my own.”

Akifumi-san looked surprised.

“...I’m sorry, that was inexcusable. I spoke callously.”

“No way! It’s natural to ask if you don’t know.”

Despite this, everyone apologizes.

“But…”

Everyone gets stuck with this topic.

“Please, don't trouble yourself. There’s a lot to a person, and that means there’s also a lot to me.”

“Indeed… ”

“Besides, if I had parents, they wouldn’t let me have this unusual part-time

job. Then I wouldn't have been able to come to such a luxurious restaurant and —."

"...is that so?"

"That's right. It's easier like this. Especially, when I think my friends would quarrel with my family, among other things. No, it doesn't necessarily mean that I think it's good to have dead parents."

"Perhaps that's true."

"Hmmm. Of course, it's also lonely."

Akifumi-san smiled.

"Add me and Taniyama-san and divide by two and the number is exactly right."

"...seven people? Even so, according to social norms, that's a little bit more."

"Well, that's true. My house really does have a lot of people."

Akifumi-san said this as if just realizing it.

"Umm, this is something strange, but—"

"What is it?"

"How do you eat your meals?"

With thirteen people, I wondered if they all ate side by side in a row.

"Well, we usually eat together."

I was impressed by what Akifumi-san said.

"Is that unusual?"

"Since your home is a restaurant, the people helping in the shop eat at unusual hours in the shop, right?"

"Oh, it's also that sort of house."

Ah. The world is vast.

"It's a little disappointing. I wanted to see where thirteen people sit in a row."

When I said this, Akifumi-san made a slightly mystified expression.

"What's wrong?"

“My mother had said you would eat with all of us tonight.”

Wow. Perhaps it will be a feast ♡

“...I wonder how we’re going to eat.”

Hmm.

“It’s a total of eighteen people.”

“That... that isn’t a meal, that’s a banquet now.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Akifumi-san and I thought pensively for a moment.

5

Returning to the base, the rack was assembled on the veranda in the front room. When Ayako and Bou-san returned from seeing to Hazuki-chan's well-being, the pair also helped carry the large amount of equipment. While we talked idly, by the time we finished the setup and check, it had become quite dark outside.

Afterwards, Akifumi-san guided us to a tatami mat room in the corner of the shop. When we were shown inside the wide, elegant room, four men were seated at a long table. One of them was Taizou-san, the father we met with the grandmother. Taizou-Ojisan was wearing white chef's clothes. So that meant the meal would be made by Ojisan.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. It would be greatly appreciated."

He politely bowed his head and guided us to the head seats. All these unnecessary kindnesses such as the hanging scrolls, flower arrangements, etc., are extremely uncomfortable for me. I would have been fed up if we had to sit in seiza, but fortunately, it turned out that we would be sitting at a table with recessed floors for our legs —relief.

Taizou-Ojisan introduced us to the men who were there. The somewhat older, plump man wearing a suit was Kazuyasu-san, the eldest son. The burly man wearing jeans and a t-shirt was Yasutaka-san, the second son. The man wearing the same chef's clothing as Taizou-Ojisan was Eijirou-san, the son-in-law. They all seemed to be just past thirty. They're all somewhat depressed looking, but them sitting here in descending order of sizes large, medium, and small was a little funny.

With only this many, I thought it was unimpressive, but then four woman carrying dishes came in. The brisk woman wearing a kimono was the mother Hiroe-san. The calm seeming woman was Youko-san, Kazuyasu-san's wife. The

really strong-willed looking woman, third from the front, was the eldest daughter Teruka-san. The fourth cool seeming, young woman, was the youngest daughter Nao-san.

Now there are even more people involved. I wonder if I can properly remember who is who… (anxiety) “Shibuya-san, would you like sake?”

Taizou-Ojisan asked Naru.

“No. Neither Lin, nor I, drink.”

In addition to that, you're a minor.

“Takigawa-san and Matsuzaki-san, is it okay?”

Hearing this, Bou-san smiled.

“It’s greatly appreciated.”

So, you’re a heavy drinker. Ayako also smiled. I wonder if she drinks alot. Not surprisingly, we’ve never drank together.

“Taniyama-san?”

“No way!”

I’m a minor!

Of how many number of dishes that came out in turn, I took notice of Lin-san’s bowl, which was suddenly sitting next to me. Somewhat, only Lin-san’s food was different. Thinking this, I looked over the table. Naru’s was also different. Evidently, only Naru and Lin-san were served different dishes.

“Why is Lin-san’s food different?”

When I asked that in a low voice, Hiroe-Obasan, who had just set down the bowl, replied, “We heard that Shibuya-san and Lin-san don’t eat meat, so we took the liberty of changing the menu, but... was that not right?”

“Huh? You don’t eat meat, Lin-san?”

This was a surprise. Come to think of it, since they always left behind a lot of food, I thought Lin-san and Naru had an unbalanced diet.

“You’re a vegetarian? You don’t eat meat at all?”

Lin-san nodded expressionlessly.

“It isn’t good to not eat meat. That’s why you’re skinny, Lin-san.”

Hiroe-obasan smiled softly and asked, “Shall we bring a little something? After you came all this way to the seaside.”

Lin-san lightly bowed his head.

“During investigations, we will abstain from meat for the purpose of religious purification.”

gasp Amazing. Naru and Lin-san had left food behind with such deep consideration. I thought they were simply being stubborn because it was their personality.

Truly, the world is profound.

“Spiritualists are very serious, aren’t they?”

When Taizou-ojisan said that admiringly, I didn't miss as Bou-san and Ayako fixed their eyes on their plates self-consciously ...HaHaHa.

***

We questioned the male and female camps about various things, however, not being able to gather anything, we withdrew to the base. In the base, the data that was being sent from the equipment in various places was shown by the lonely monitors.

“Abnormalities?”

Naru asked Lin-san, who sat in front of the equipment.

“Currently, there are none. I’ll check the previous results.”

Shown by the monitor screens were the corridor of the main building, Hazuki-chan’s room, the shop corridor, the cove side spare room, and five locations in the coast side spare rooms. There were no abnormalities in any of the videos.

“Do you think there will be activity tonight?

When I asked that, Naru answered while continuing to look at the screens, “Well, there aren’t a lot clues about what exactly is happening. We’ll try going to

the local library tomorrow. —Bou-san.”

“What's up?”

“Set up a barrier around Hazuki-chan for the night...”

As he started to say that, Akifumi-san came in with tools for making tea.

"Thank you for your hard work.”

He had arranged the teapot and electric kettle for us. While he was making tea, he said, “Taniyama-san, that was unfortunate.”

Huh?

“Thirteen people. Were you disappointed by the small number of people?”

Ahaha, that’s it?

“Well, not really. But, I thought it would be more lively.”

“Normally, my brothers alone are more lively, but… recently they’ve been really gloomy.”

“Of course, when there is worry, you’ll definitely become gloomy, right?”

When I said that, Akifumi-san gave a mixed smile.

“Who was the son-in-law, again? Eijirou-san? He seemed like he was in somewhat of a bad mood, didn’t he?”

It felt like he was somewhat irritated. I was a little scared.

“I agree. I wonder what happened, suddenly.”

“Suddenly?”

Akifumi-san nodded.

“It may be nothing, but… Both Kuzu-niisan and Eijirou-niisan help with the shop, so they generally have good manners since manners are essential for the business. That was the first time I saw Eijirou-niisan with such a sullen expression.”

Naru frowned.

“In other words, Eijirou-san generally isn’t the sort of person to have such a

sullen expression in public?”

“Yes. He might get angry, but until now, he’s never shown it in his expression. At least, that was the first time I had seen it on his face.”

“Kazuyasu-san, also?”

“Yes. Kuzu-niisan has seemed on edge these past two or three days. Yasu-niisan seems so also. Yasu-niisan is probably the worst. When he’s in public he restrains himself a little, but by nature he’s a very cheerful man. To the extent that he used to be scolded by our parents.”

...eeeh.

“How long has Yasutaka-san’s personality been different?”

“I think since the day of grandfather’s funeral. Even though I asked why, he won’t say.”

“Is there anyone else with changes in their personality?”

Akifumi-san was thoughtful for a moment.

“Youko-neesan.”

Now, which woman was she?

“The strong-willed looking one?”

“No, that’s Teruka. Teruka-neesan is the most strong-willed in nature of the family.”

“Then, the calm seeming one?”

“Yes. No, she’s a calm person by nature, but...”

“But?”

Asked by Naru, Akifumi-san replied, “If I were to say whose personality changed the most of the family, it would be the children above all. There are another two in addition to Hazuki. Katsuki and Hazuki are the children of Kazu-niisan. Teruka-neesan’s child is Wakako. Katsuki and Wakako are strange. The pair are being secretive lately.”

When I tilted my head to the side, Akifumi-san smiled in a troubled fashion.

“How can I say this… Originally, they weren’t like that, however, recently they’ve been sticking close and won’t be separated from each other. On top of that, the pair talk secretively between themselves all the time. When I ask what they’re talking about, they exchange looks then run away...”

Hmm…

“This has also been about since grandfather’s funeral. The funeral was so hectic, there wasn’t time to be concerned about the children. In the last two or three days, it’s suddenly gotten to a state to be concerned about.”

“I see...”

Naru contemplated the situation.

A family who changed… I wonder what’s going on in this house…

Soon after, I was told to fix the angle of a camera that was placed in a room on the coast side, and I left the base. Upon entering the corridor, it was pitch black. Farther down, the light from the emergency lamp could be seen, which meant all of the electricity was off.

“Huh?”

I wonder if they turned it off to conserve electricity. I just had to go to the room diagonally opposite and, without thinking deeply, I began to walk. For now, it wasn’t dark enough that I couldn’t walk.

It was when I walked half-way. A faint voice came from somewhere along the dark and long corridor. I was surprised and stopped walking. The voice seemed faint like breathing. I looked around my surroundings, but they were obscured by the dark. Once again, just as I was thinking I might have imagined it, there came a voice like a faint whisper.

My heart was pounding. Once again, I looked around carefully. Then I noticed a lump on the corridor wall a short distance away towards the corridor of the main building. The lump was around waist height and about the size of a soccer ball.

“...san”

A quiet, secretive voice reached my ears.

“Is someone there…?”

Something thin extended from the lump, beckoning several times.

“...Oneesan.”

A child? Is it a child? The voice seemed like that of a child. When I looked harder, the lump seemed to be a child’s head. But, the corridor is straight, so there’s no turning point there.

“...Oneesan...”

Frightened by the whispering voice, I was just about to return to the base, and then I remembered there were lattice doors lined up along the walls. They were probably leaning out from inside the lattice door.

I took a breath of relief, then began to walk toward the child.

“Who is it?”

The child was beckoning. They came out into the corridor. One— Two people.

When I approached, it was definitely children. A boy and girl dressed in summer pajamas. They were either first graders in elementary school or below. In that case, these children were probably Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan. Wakako-chan was just a little bigger.

“What’s wrong? You’re Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan, right?”

When I stopped in front of them and asked, the pair stared at me. They whispered something to each other secretively. Then Wakako-chan said, “...how many of you are there?”

That was what I heard.

“Eh?”

Wakako-chan repeated it to include bite.

“How many are there?”

“There are five of us.”

I was getting ready to ask them if it was okay for them to be up this late at night when the pair began whispering again.

“...five people...”

“That’s a lot...”

“...that’s bad....”

I very faintly heard these words. They were discussing something secretly. Then, they abruptly turned away in unison. They began to walk toward the main building.

“Wait a minute. What’s wrong?”

Wakako-chan looked back.

“Five, right?”

“That’s right. Hey, what’s up?”

“It’s really nothing you need to worry about.”

Laughing quietly, they scurried away.

Dumbfounded, I vacantly watched the direction where the pair had disappeared for a short while.

...What was this uneasiness? I didn’t know what was so strange in particular, but… I could understood why it seemed difficult for Akifumi-san to talk about it. It was difficult to convey this feeling to others. Still, something was very strange…

I breathed out and attempted to go fix the camera angle. That was when it happened.

—Screams could be heard from the end of the corridor.

Chapter 2 - Unforeseen Circumstances

1

Voices were heard from the direction of the main building. Naru and the others rushed from the base, and as we all hurried towards the main building, the uproar rapidly increased. There was the violent sound of a voice shouting something. And then, as we rushed in, we were confronted with the figure of Eijirou-san, who was raging and grasping a kitchen knife.

The room appeared to be a living room. Taizou-ojisan and Kazuyasu-san were holding Eijirou-san under the arms from behind. In the corner of the room, crouching and attempting to embrace each other, were Hiroe-obasan and Teruka-san, who had frightened expressions.

Eijirou-san's face was red with blood. There was a deep cut on his forehead and from there blood flowed down, staining half his face, however, Eijirou-san didn't seem to notice. The tip of the grasped knife was broken and the broken tip was sticking out of the TV frame. Foam had accumulated at the corners of his mouth and he was shouting something, but he wasn't speaking clearly and I couldn't understand what he was saying. He was struggling with his whole body, trying to shake off his restraints. Though both Taizou-ojisan and Kazuyasu-san appeared to be considerably heavy people, the momentum seemed liable to shake off the pair who were clinging to him.

"Lin."

When Naru spoke in a low voice, Lin-san walked up to Eijirou-san without a word. Moving very naturally, he didn't seem particularly nervous or enthusiastic. Eijirou-san glared at Lin-san. He raised his voice menacingly and bared his teeth. He raised his right arm, which was holding the kitchen knife. Taizou-ojisan, who clung to his right shoulder, was pitched forward and fell.

"Lin-san—"

I was the one who involuntarily cried out, but the truth was there was no

reason at all for me to raise my voice. Lin-san shifted his body and with a *pop*, swept away Eijirou-san's right hand, which he had thrust out. With excessive force, Lin-san wound his arm around Eijirou-san's neck, causing him to slump forward, and that was the end of it. 'Be careful,' I wanted to say, however, before I could voice it, Eijirou-san's neck was being embraced by Lin-san and Eijirou-san had fallen on his backside.

Lin-san expressionlessly looked back at us, who were unable to react to the impromptu action.

"I think it would be better if we tied him with something."

Akifumi-san moved to bound and ran off.

"What exactly happened?"

It was Naru who calmly spoke. At last taking a breath, Hiroe-obasan and Teruka-san stood up again. Teruka-san spoke in a trembling voice, "I'd like to know precisely what happened here. It happened without warning."

Her tone was as if she was blaming Naru.

"He suddenly became violent?"

"Yes. When we were talking here, he suddenly stood up and… it was a small argument."

"May I ask about the details?"

Raising an arm full of small cuts, Teruka-san brushed her hair back.

"It was because of his moodiness at mealtime today, I just asked him the reason why. He insisted it was nothing, so in a moment of anger I said, 'If it's nothing, then why did you have such an expression?' and then he suddenly stood up and left the room. Just when I thought he had immediately come back, he was carrying a kitchen knife… I was certain that he had taken leave of his senses."

Eijirou-san reached out. Lin-san removed his necktie and fastened Eijirou-san's arms behind his back.

"Do you have any idea why Eijirou-san was in a bad mood?"

“I don’t know. He was normal before the meal. Even in the itaba...”

“Itaba?”

“It’s the kitchen. My husband is a chef. Ordinarily, with my father, the pair always prepare the dishes. They completed the preparation from start to end, then he left saying he was going outside for some fresh air. When he returned he was like that.”

Akifumi-san came back with a first aid kit and cargo rope. While seeing to the first aid, Bou-san said, “I wonder if it’s spirit possession.”

Naru nodded.

“I’m sure it is. Looks like we’d better call John. Or—”

Naru looked back at Ayako and continued.

“Matsuzaki-san, can you expel it?”

“It’s not impossible, but… it’s not quite my specialty.”

Oh? Is there something that’s your specialty?

“Bou-san?”

“I might be able to. I mean, it would be my first time doing it on anyone human.”

Tch. Don’t rely on that guy.

“Are you confident of a success?”

“People are supposed to improve after there is a failure for the first time.”

Ayako bluntly ridiculed him.

“That is to say, you’ve never removed a possessing spirit up to now. You’re a terrible spiritualist.”

“If you’re so inclined, maybe we should leave it to you and the nine syllable cuts? But no matter what, I don’t take responsibility.”

What’s known as the ‘nine syllables’ is a type of repulsion magic. Since you cut the air nine times while chanting nine characters, it’s called the ‘nine syllables.’

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying Buddhist powers shouldn’t be used on a person directly.”

“In what way do you mean?”

“I don’t know. There’s no one who’s done it.”

Huh?

“For that reason, I also haven’t expelled a spirit that’s possessed a human. There was a time I expelled a spirit possessing a vase.”

Bou-san scratched his head and spoke again.

“The spirit came out, but the vase was also shattered. I would probably have an uneasy conscience.”

It was a problem before your conscience!

“Ah! But there was a time I cut the nine syllables towards Taka. She asked me if I could show her.”

Bou-san lightly poked me.

“Don’t do it again. Because it was Mai-grade, nothing happened.”

“Okay.”

Hmm, exactly what kind of mechanism is it?

Naru directed his gaze towards Ayako.

“For the time being, will you try to do it?”

“Okay... Since it’s just expelling, I think I can do it for now. But, I don’t know if it will possess again.”

“It would be better than leaving it possessing Eijirou-san. Since it seems to be an extremely violent spirit.”

...definitely. If they were unlucky, both Hiroe-obasan and Teruka-san could have been killed.

I nodded inwardly, and then had a sudden thought. The people who died in an accident in the past. Did everyone really die in a mere accident?

2

Eijirou-san, who had lost consciousness, was carried to a storeroom in the immediate vicinity of the living room, which appeared to be safe even if he rampaged again. While Naru was contacting John, Ayako prepared for the exorcism. It was actually a little past eleven o'clock when the prayer began.

"Can John come?"

When I asked Naru, he replied,

"Yes. He said he'll depart from the other side on the first plane tomorrow with Hara-san."

Wow. With Masako, huh?

I knew John (John Brown, Exorcist) wouldn't be a problem, but he also called Masako (Hara Masako, Medium).

"You also called Masako?"

"I don't want to be outmaneuvered. This way, we'll avoid trouble."

...hmm. I'm not so sure.

"I reverently offer this prayer for thy presence..."

Ayako's chant began.

"In this unhallowed place without thy enshrined aura and I ask that my request be heard and answered, purify these many vessels and may peace and calm be granted."

She spoke in a believable tone, but it was very doubtful whether there really was an effect. After all, until today, not one person has witnessed a time when Ayako was useful.

We were watching Ayako and Eijirou-san in silence. The equipment was put in the corner, and the expressionless eye of the video camera was fixedly staring at

Eijirou-san.

Before long, Ayako snapped her fingers and Eijirou-san, who had been lying limp until then, opened his eyes. He tried to get up as if repelled, but unfortunately for him, his body was wrapped in cargo ropes. Eijirou-san ground his teeth and, as he rolled around like a caterpillar, he began to growl. The sound rumbled in the back of his throat like what a dog issues when intimidating an enemy.

“...is this safe?”

When I asked Naru in a low voice, his answer was an expressionless, ‘Dunno.’

“Isn’t it beyond Ayako’s abilities, after all?”

“Perhaps. At any rate, John will arrive tomorrow.”

“Why can’t Lin-san do it?”

Lin-san is something like a Taoist of Chinese sorcery. He should be capable of a lot of things.

“Because we don’t know the true identity of our opponent.”

...unfortunate.

Just as I thought so, Naru widened his eyes.

“...Mai. Step back.”

When I quickly looked in Eijirou-san’s direction, the shadow of something pale overlapping his figure was visible. Something —it was the form of some kind of beast.

“What... is that?”

There was no reply from Naru. Suddenly, he looked up at the ceiling. Creaking from the house rattling could be heard as it overlapped with Ayako’s chants.

Naru’s eyes moved in the direction of Akifumi-san and the others who were looking inside from the entrance of the storeroom.

“Lin, accompany Mai. Take care of the spectators.”

“Yes.”

With a nod, Lin-san urged me along. I slowly proceeded to walk over to where Akifumi-san and the others were standing in a stupor, visibly surprised. Eijirou-san burst into laughter. I looked back in surprise. Eijirou-san was laughing so hard that he was writhing. The character of his unpleasantly loud laughter was completely empty.

Meanwhile, the creaking also continued. The figure of the beast, which seemed to double in Eijirou-san's body, gradually became darker. It appeared to be a long tailed beast. Although similar to a fox, it was very large since it was taller than a person. It stooped down and its pair of eyes stared steadily in this direction— Ayako joined her hands together, making a sound.

"Hail the goddess Marici, I pray to thee, descend here before us and grant thy protection."

She firmly stated and folded her fingers together. At the same time, the beast sprang up. A muted scream arose in the background.

It was like slow motion from there. Jumping high, the beast passed overhead of Ayako. Visibly surprised, Ayako followed it with her eyes. It was heading straight in this direction. Just as I was about to involuntarily close my eyes, Lin-san and Bou-san stepped forward. The pair were the reason the beast altered its direction of landing. Straight in line of its altered path was Naru. All of a sudden, Naru crouched low as if to square off. It was at that time.

"Naru! Don't do it!"

Startled, Naru looked at Lin-san just for a moment. About to raise his hands, he suddenly stopped. Almost simultaneously as Naru returned his gaze to the beast, it collided with him.

"Naru!"

I don't know whose voice it was. At least, I didn't voice it. Naru's body was blown back. He immediately slammed into the wall behind, then the figure of the beast disappeared. It looked like time lapse as the head of the beast penetrated Naru's chest, gradually disappearing until the tip of the tail as if slipping through.

"Are you okay!?"

Bou-san ran over. Naru was kneeling while leaning against the wall. He

coughed into his hand.

“Are you injured?”

“...I’m fine.”

I couldn’t move as if somehow paralyzed. Someone from behind put their hand on my shoulder.

“Taniyama-san?”

Akifumi-san looked into my face.

“Are you alright?”

“Ah...yes… I was a little surprised.”

Naru stood up and lightly brushed dust off himself.

“How is Eijirou-san?”

That being said, Ayako rushed over in a panic. Absently, Eijirou-san raised just his head, wearing a blank look.

“Are you alright?”

Hearing Ayako, Eijirou-san looked around restlessly.

“What is this... what happened?”

3

After going outside in the evening, Eijirou-san didn't at all remember the events of that time onward. I also tried to play the video from during the prayer, but there was a problem where the image got interrupted from around when the figure of the fox-like beast appeared.

"The image doesn't show up."

Lin-san nodded.

"It's probably a spirit barrier. Since the tape is running properly. All the needles on the other instruments are off the scale."

The screens, which have numbers lined up that I never quite understand, are filled with the letters, "ERROR." And even the thermography image jumped. This isn't a trivial matter by any means.

Bou-san spoke in a low voice,

"It appeared to be a mere fox, but it might not be such an easy opponent…"

Yeah. When I nodded, Lin-san looked back with a questioning look.

"Naru?"

Naru was resting his elbow on the table and covering his face.

"What's wrong!?"

"...Nothing, my back just hurts a little."

Ah, from that terrible collision.

"Are you okay?"

"Nothing serious. —Lin, I'm sorry, but I'm going to take a nap."

Lin-san frowned slightly and nodded. His complexion didn't look particularly bad. Naru stood up and Ayako stood up as well.

“Are you really okay? Are you sore anywhere other than your back?”

While asking those things, she proceeded to follow after Naru. Here, the proper strategy for dealing with Ayako is probably to not interfere.

“I don’t know...”

“What?”

“Ayako. Who does that woman think she is?”

Unreliable?

“There’s no doubt she completely failed that exorcism a little while ago. Have you seen Ayako do something useful?”

That’s true, although…

“Generally, someone who calls themselves a ‘miko’ is suspicious. Does a miko who belongs to a legitimate shrine go around aimlessly performing exorcisms without permission?”

“Huh, really?”

“Really. I’d say Ayako’s ‘miko’ title is merely self-proclaimed. Although there are certainly many spiritualists who become mikos, it’s without permission or it’s just not true. Those kinds of people do exorcisms as part of religious activities. It’s not at all religious to Ayako, but she doesn’t seem to be an ameateur regarding Shinto since she tentatively conforms to the methods of Dual Aspect Shinto. Although, I have no doubt she properly trained somewhere...”

“Hmm.”

“In the first place, why does Naru-bou bring her along if she’s truly incompetent?”

“That’s true.”

When I think about it, Ayako is also quite a mysterious woman.

While thinking that sort of thing, I gazed absently at the monitors and instantly stiffened.

Ack! What is that!?

It was the video of the shop corridor. In the center of the screen, the distant figures of people were visible. It wasn't anything particularly mysterious, but why did it appear as if both of Naru's hands were placed on Ayako's shoulders!?

"What's happened?"

I was spoken to by Bou-san, but was I in a position to answer? Naru pulled Ayako towards himself. Ah, Ayako's hands were around Naru's body. Isn't— isn't this a love scene no matter how you look at it!?

Bou-san also spotted the image,

"Ugh!"

That was his short reply. After that he said something as if impressed (amazed?), then suddenly, he stood up.

This hindrance was quickly resented. ...Oh, being ambushed like this. I was only being vigilant of Masako!

"Lin! Come on!"

Bou-san's voice was desperate. When he looked back, his expression had changed and he ran out of the base. Lin-san even stood up as if he had been repelled. I was stunn— like that, my gaze returned to the screen and I went pale.

—Love scene? ...not in the least!

That's Naru strangling Ayako.

***

By the time I had rushed into the hallway in a panic, Naru was collapsed in the hallway. Off to the side, Ayako was coughing violently as she sat. Her knees trembled. I'm glad Ayako was safe. For the sake of both Ayako and Naru.

"Bou-san, what happened to Naru?"

"Lin one shot him with a knife hand strike."

Saying this, he hit his neck with the side of his palm in imitation.

"What the hell is the matter with him…!?"

Bou-san rubbed Ayako's back, who was wheezing.

“For crying out loud! No matter how bad Naru’s personality is, is it enough to strangle other people?”

...that’s true, but…

“That thing from earlier. It didn’t pass through the wall. It went into Naru.”

...Ah.

“He’s been possessed. It had to have been a strong-willed spirit in order to possess Naru.”

Bou-san said and made a bitter expression.

“This thing is going to be troublesome.”

4

What the hell? How can such a thing happen?

For now, we carried Naru and laid him down in the room adjoining the base.

“What is that thing?”

Ayako’s voice had gone hoarse.

“I’m telling you, it’s trouble. It came out of nowhere. It was awful!”

“Now, now. Naru didn’t do it of his own volition.”

“Would you still be able to say that if you were the one being attacked? Do you have any idea how frightening it was when Naru’s eyes glazed over!?”

...certainly, that would be frightening.

“I’ll never forgive him!”

Yeah, yeah. With a perfunctory pat on Ayako’s back, I cautiously tried to advise Bou-san.

“Wouldn’t it perhaps be better if he was tied like Eijirou-san was?”

Bou-san frowned.

“Tie up Naru-bou?”

Well, that sentiment is understandable. Who knows what he’ll say when he’s recovered his senses. In spite of this, keeping him asleep like this is dangerous.

“I think it will be useless.”

The one who said that in a calm voice was Lin-san.

“Why?”

To Bou-san’s question, Lin-san, remaining absolutely expressionless, answered, “In the case of being tied, it would be impossible to stop Naru.”

Bou-san tilted his head.

“...What do you mean?”

“It’s as you’ve heard. I think Matsuzaki-san was very lucky.”

Lin-san said and looked at Ayako.

“I think that perhaps the person who has possessed Naru also does not yet quite understand how to use him. Otherwise, Matsuzaki-san would already be dead.”

“Okay, what does that mean?”

“Thus, it’s as you’ve heard. When that thing learns to use Naru fully, we have no countermeasures. It’s useless to try to tie or confine him. We— and also Naru himself, would not be able to survive.”

We directed our gazes to Naru, who was involuntarily sleeping.

?? What do you mean?

“If I ask you what that means, can you tell me?”

“I’m sincerely sorry, but this is my own discretion.”

Crestfallen, Bou-san dropped his shoulders and sighed once.

“Come on...”

“I understand your displeasure, but I cannot say. You have no choice but to believe me here. Believe me that Naru is a more dangerous man than you can imagine.”

Ayako and I looked at each other. I don’t know the meaning at all.

“Answer one thing. Are you strong in a fight?”

Bou-san asked and Lin-san readily answered.

“Presumably.”

“Compared to Naru?”

Lin-san expressionlessly declared, “If we fought to the death, it would be an overwhelming victory for Naru.”

—What did you say?

Bou-san looked at Lin-san intently, then released a deep, deep sigh.

“...Got it. In other words, it’s useless even if we wrap him in a bamboo mat and throw him in the storeroom, right? You’re saying Naru is a dangerous person. Which means we have no choice but to try to do an exorcism before it’s too late.”

Lin-san looked at Bou-san.

“I think it’s impossible even if Brown-san tries.”

“Why?”

“A human being of the type such as Naru, in exchange for being difficult to possess, is unmanageable once possessed.”

“Type such as Naru...”

“The type that have excellent self-control are very strong-willed. If we fecklessly meddle and lose control, it will be seriously dangerous. Especially for Naru.”

“—Well, what should we do?”

“I don’t know.”

...you don’t know, what!?

“If we were able to grasp the true identity of the possessing spirit, an effective method of exorcism might be found. Conceivably, I may be able to expel it as well.”

Bou-san ruffled his hair.

“Just great...”

“Hey, Bou-san.”

I timidly tried to ask.

“Is it such a difficult thing to expel a possessing spirit?”

As far as what’s seen on television, this isn’t a spiritualist’s typical work. Lin-san, Ayako and Bou-san are spiritualists, but even so, none of those three can

exorcise the spirit.

“In brief, it’s because there are various things known as spirit possession. — People will often say, ‘I think I may be possessed by an evil spirit.’ In fact, when a person’s physical condition is poor, in a run of bad luck, no matter what one does it doesn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Although one might say he’s possessed with something, it’s only keeping close to his side. Since spirits consume the energy of people, a person’s physical condition will become poor and no matter what one does it doesn’t work.”

“Is that so?”

“Maybe. I don’t often have trouble expelling that sort. When it comes to the shabby fellows, they’ll run away when just approached by a spiritualist.”

“Ohh?”

“When it comes to the fellows with a little bit more resistance, they tend to cling tightly. They whisper bad things, or provoke unthinkable desires. When a person is possessed by one such as this, they’re ‘under an evil influence.’ ...still, this also isn’t very difficult. If a spiritualist has a stronger will than the possessed person, then the spirit will come out even if the spiritualist doesn’t call out to it.”

Ahhh.

“The cases that are the most serious are with guys like Naru-bou. For example, even if intense hypnosis is applied, it isn’t possible to make a human commit suicide and murder if he doesn’t even want to. If you’re psychological resistance is too strong, you’ll awaken.”

“Even so, Naru...”

“Right. Therefore, it’s serious. To make a person do something against his own will means that they become unable to compete with their own will. So to speak, the spirit is infesting the inside of the mind. It’s not that easy to expel spirits of this kind.”

“Hmm...”

“Roughly, the power of the possessing spirit is the person’s own will…

weakening the energy of the possessed. When this is the case, there are worries, a depressed mood, and a drop in physical strength. When the mental state is enhanced with positive energy, some spirits don't come in the first place. Most spirits would dislike dealing with Naru-bou."

"He's of the type that are obstinate and stubborn, and they have full confidence in themselves and they don't feel depressed."

"That's it. It seems he was probably caught momentarily off guard and forcibly infested, but given the kind of person he is, it can't be done by a half-hearted spirit. ...definitely, it may be tough even for John."

"But Naru, so to speak, has exceptional willpower, which is extensive…"

"So it's more troublesome. The thing that possessed Naru successfully entered his consciousness and has control over him. When this happens, you would expect the willpower to reject the spirit, but the truth is, it's exploited and used in order to protect the spirit. Exorcism, and all that, is, after all, a battle of wills, so as a matter of course, the one with a better willpower wins. Which one of Naru and John do you think is stronger?"

"...Naru."

"See? That's why exorcism is difficult. This means we have no choice but to continue the investigation. However, what do we do with Naru-bou in the meantime?"

It's useless even if we tie or confine him?

"I will not allow anything. It's best to leave him asleep as he is, through sleep paralysis. Since he's dangerous when conscious."

"Isn't it dangerous to Naru-bou?"

Bou-san was grim faced.

"So to speak, doesn't that mean he'll be completely defenseless?"

"I'll leave my shiki."

Shiki means an employed spirit that obeys Lin-san's orders.

"Is it reliable?"

“If I leave them all.”

“All?”

When Bou-san asked, Lin-san replied, “There are five shiki in my possession. In each, there is a strong point and there is a weak point. The reason is that they are intended to complement each other in five. If I leave them all, it’s perfectly safe, but instead, I’m not capable of doing much else.”

“In other words, you’ll be completely powered-down.”

“That's the general idea.”

Bou-san snapped his fingers.

“Since we’re confused about what to do about Naru-bou, we need to make him incapable of moving. Especially if, as you say, Naru is dangerous goods.”

Bou-san regarded us.

“Well, what do you want to do? Ayako, Mai.”

Bou-san laughed at Ayako and me, who, confused by his meaning, looked at each other.

“In other words, the fact is, we have to do it without Naru.”

Time stopped for just a moment.

“He’s completely useless. We probably can’t afford to run away and take him with us in his condition. In other words, there aren’t many options for us. Flee and abandon Naru, or else try to do everything within our ability.”

I was involuntarily shouting.

“There’s no way we can leave and we’re not abandoning him!”

Bou-san smiled.

“We’ll then, Mai is staying. What about you, Ayako?”

I looked back behind me. A short silence descended as we stared at Ayako.

“If you lack self-confidence, withdraw.”

Ayako brushed back her hair.

“So you have self-confidence, huh?”

“Well, I think I’ll manage somehow.”

“Doesn’t seem too reliable.”

Bou-san scratched his head.

“It’s painful that Naru-bou isn’t available. But there’s something we have that Naru doesn’t.”

“Ohh, that’s news. I wonder if you can can tell us what it is?”

Bou-san lightly closed one eye.

“A humble attitude and kind personality.”

...that was bad.

After a moment, Ayako burst into laughter.

“That’s true!”

Well, it is compared to Naru....

Ayako breathed an exaggerated sigh.

“How can I help out? Because I’m no longer human if I abandon Naru.”

“Therefore, when it comes to us, we’re kind human beings.”

“Just so.”

That’s right, if we hold out here, Naru will become indebted to us.

5

—I was running down a path at night.

I was nearly at wit's end and running with desperation. 'Oh god,' I muttered over and over in my mind. (Oh god?) While running away, I steadily began to feel sorrowful. 'How did it end up like this?' I think. (Like this?) I wonder what the hell I should do now.

It was a path in the forest. I ran and ran, and when I escaped the forest, I came out to an excessively small open area. Very slightly, all over the grove clearing, there was overgrown summer grass. There were figures visible there. One was standing and the other was lying down. I stopped as if sewn into place, thinking, 'Oh god,' once more.

Standing there was Naru. Basking in the moonlight, his complexion was white as if he wasn't of this world. He was holding a knife in his hand. The blade was wet with crimson and droplets still dripped from the edge of the blade.

"I killed him."

Naru said. Lying there was Akifumi-san. I closed my eyes tightly (What the hell?). There were no signs of breathing. I covered my face. This..is the end (The end?).

"I had no choice."

Naru said and threw away the knife. He held out his white left hand.

"...why?"

I couldn't take his hand.

"When I came, he was here. I thought you betrayed me, Mai."

"There's no way I would do such a thing."

"But he's richer and also has status." (Huh?) "That's completely irrelevant."

I covered my face once again.

“I thought you betrayed me, Mai. After all, I thought you chose the better man.”

“But there’s no way...” (This—this must be a so-called ‘liquidation of a love triangle.’) “If not, then why did he come here?”

“...to do something like this. I told you I’d run away with you. Why didn’t you believe me?”

“Only you should have known about this place.”

“The letter was secretly switched. I was waiting in a completely different place...”

I took Naru’s hand. Naru pulled me towards himself (eek! eek!).

“...what are we going to do now?”

“I killed someone, I can’t run away.” (That’s true.) “...death?” (eh?)

“Yeah. Even if I surrender, I’ll be killed anyway.”

“...we’ll go together.”

When I said this, Naru smiled. Silently, he lead me by the hand. Still being lead by the hand, I began to run.

—wait a minute.

Of course, isn’t this a dream? What a shameless dream I’m seeing. I mean, caught trying to escape with Naru, someone interfering with it, and a love triangle with Akifumi-san? ...oh, it’s juicy. No, not so. I mean, after this I’m going to commit lover’s suicide with Naru? I think Taka and Senpai will get a laugh out of this when I get back to Tokyo and tell them. —Or not! (Actually, in this situation, the gag would be on me!) I ran with Naru. When I looked back, pursuers could be seen. We ran and ran until we finally arrived at a shrine.

Suddenly I thought, ‘Why isn’t it the sea?’ I don’t know why, but I had intended to go to the sea.

Barely managing to reach the shrine, my legs lost their strength. Naru tugged, but I couldn’t run anymore. From somewhere, Bou-san appeared standing

toward one side.

“There’s nothing else we can do. We’re surrounded.” (Surrounded?) Naru overlooked the surrounding area.

“This far?”

“What will become of us?”

Ayako said this. Lin-san was toward one side.

“We must prepare ourselves.” (Prepare?) When I tried to ask, ‘What do you mean?’, people suddenly came out from the surrounding forest. I didn’t know the number. Although we all had swords, there was no way out for us. With a hopeless feeling, I watched those people rush towards us.

—This… betrayal. (Betrayal?)

“Always.”

Someone said. I nodded and clenched my fists.

“They will always be cursed until the end of days…!” (End of days? Cursed? What do you mean!?) Eijirou-san, who swung up his sword, had approached. His drawn sword gleamed and I just stared as it swung down.

***

—I suddenly woke up.

The inside of the room was dark. On the wide eight tatami mats, there were two futons. A sleeping Ayako was visible.

For some reason, the paper sliding door that was supposed to be closed was open, and the bright, clear moonlight was penetrating through the window of the veranda.

...what a dream that was!

Just as I pondered the dream, there was a loud *bang* from the direction of the window. I lifted my head. The windowpane thudded once again. Someone was throwing pebbles.

I stood up and went to open the window. Beneath the window, the water

surface of the cove was far below. Pitch black water extended, mirror-like. From the surface of the water, innumerable white lights were floating up with the speed of falling snow. The very dimly lit lights, which resembled spirit lights, disappeared straight into the sky.

...ah, I didn't wake up.

The figure of a person on the surface of the water was visible… it was Naru. He raised his head and looked up at me, then called, 'Come on.' I climbed over the window frame and jumped down as if drawn. It's no big deal. Since this is a dream.

I gently descended and landed on the surface of the water. It felt like I had stepped on glass barefoot. A number of lights went floating into the sky. Naru smiled. His warm smile appeared slightly troubled.

"It's become serious, hasn't it?"

When I said this, Naru nodded. Then,

"...did you see the dream?"

He asked.

"Dream? Perhaps the one where you and I commit lover's suicide?"

Naru nodded and smiled as if relieved. Then he tilted his head a little.

"...were you scared?"

"Nah. Not really."

"If that's the case, I'm glad."

Naru smiled. His eyes calmed and his expression became exceptionally beautiful.

"Did you possibly show me that dream?"

"Slightly different. I only showed the direction to enter the dream."

"Showed the direction?"

I asked in return, but Naru only nodded.

The cove was completely surrounded by cliffs. One of the cliffs was

disconnected by a thin, V-shaped crack, and from there the cove joined with the sea. In the thin alley, rocks projected from the cliff as if fighting each other, and waves scarcely shifted the surface of the water. When I looked up behind me, the building was visible, which jutted out atop linked timber similar to the stage of Kiyomizu Temple. It was a rather spectacular view. An infinite number of white lights softly rose up and crossed over there. A large dark hole was visible in the stone of the crack. That's the cave Akifumi-san was talking about. The sheer cliff seemed to be made of really hard rock. In the rock face, a depression, as if scooped out, led on from the cave entrance. It couldn't have been made naturally. Someone must have carved out a pathway. It was just wide enough for a person to walk alone, and when I followed it with my gaze, it soon became a stone stairway continuing until the top of the cliff.

Viewing my surroundings, small lights crossed before my eyes.

It truly seemed like snow.

"Are these all spirits?"

"Yes. They seem to be drifting spirits."

Naru said so and started walking toward the cave. He went to the cave entrance and called to me.

The cave wasn't that big. It was less than half the size of a gymnasium. I had thought the water most likely passed through here since I heard the cave connected to the cove from the sea, however that wasn't the case. The ground of the cave was one meter or higher than the surface of the water. Stones, which seem to be scattered about, were lying to one side. The cave curved in the shape of a '〈' and the sea could be seen on the other side. Gentle waves rolled across the surface of the water, from which various sized rocks protruded, and broke onto the shore. The ground of the seaward side was a little lower. The waves had reached up to the entrance of the cave. A small shrine was built in the innermost bend of the cave. Then, as if riding a wave, small, white lights blew into the cave from the entrance of the seaward side. After they passed through the inside of the cave and exited to the cove, they blew upwards and went up high.

"Hey, what kind of spirits are these?"

"Probably those of the lives lost at sea around here. Since here seems to be the

place where the souls are drifting.”

I tried reaching out my hand. A small light touched my fingertip. There was the sensation of something splashing on the end of my finger, and I somehow understood this was a fish.

“So, there’s a shrine?”

I said and looked back at the shrine. It was a small, old shrine. Somehow, it appeared to be a little bit distorted.

“There’s something... strange.”

Naru nodded.

“I don’t understand it well, either. It’s not a bad place, but it doesn’t seem like a good place... yeah, it’s a sign of sacred ground.”

“Hmm...”

I nodded and tried asking Naru.

“Naru, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry for worrying you.”

“Well... I’m glad you’re okay.”

When I said so, Naru smiled. It was a very beautiful smile. While looking at that smile, I thought, ‘I like Naru after all.’

***

—Then I really woke up.

I woke up? ...Yeah, I woke up.

The moment I opened my eyes, I felt very disappointed. I wanted to talk more. Thinking so, I shifted my head while still lying down. The paper sliding doors were properly closed. The bluish light of predawn was shining in across the white paper.

Chapter 3 - Object from the Sea

1

The reactions of John and Masako, who arrived the following afternoon, were a sight to see.

“Naru is possessed by a spirit of uncommon will-power and is incapable of moving.”

The expressions of the pair when I said that. Masako looked as if she might cry.

“...how is he doing at present?”

“He’s sleeping. Lin-san put a certain spell on him to prevent him from gaining consciousness.”

“May I see him?”

Masako looked at Lin-san. Lin-san nodded.

“If only to see his face. Please do not enter the room under any circumstances.”

Masako nodded with a very serious expression. She honestly looked as if she might cry. I thought, ‘This girl also truly likes Naru after all.’

“Over here.”

I opened the sliding door. Last night we transferred Naru to the eight tatami in the back of the room we’re using as a base. We were somewhat anxious of keeping him by himself in the room next door; therefore, the opinion to move him was unanimous.

Masako looked inside and exhaled. A pained noise could be heard.

There was only one futon in the room, and at the four corners of that, charms were stuck in the tatami with tree branches. There wasn’t a single movement from Naru. Unless looking with considerable care, one might think he wasn’t breathing. A small character was drawn on his white forehead. That was also

written by Lin-san, although it looked like the red done by Indian women. Somehow it suits Naru well.

“Do you know what kind of spirit has possessed him?”

When I asked, Masako weakly shook her head.

“I— I cannot see it well. I can feel the spirit that has possessed him, but… I wonder if I should call it an empty spirit.”

Lin-san looked back reprovingly.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s clear and colorless, and it also does not emit any emotions whatsoever. And yet, its presence is very strong. Perhaps something may be interfering in order to prevent us from grasping the true identity of the spirit.”

Lin-san looked down, falling deep in thought.

“May I close this?”

When I asked, Masako nodded in assent.

“Well then,”

Bou-san explained the general circumstances to John and Masako. In the middle of the story, Akifumi-san brought us some coffee.

“Th—that was Matsuzaki-san I heard on the other side, wasn’t it?”

It was said to John and Ayako laughed loud.

“Don’t worry about it. I was shaking with all my might at this person’s joke. Ho—hoho.”

...this woman is still laughing at such a thing.

Bou-san turned his gaze to Lin-san.

“Was there activity last night?”

“In the main building and a cove side room. Would you like to see?”

“I would.”

...depressing. The tone is all wrong. After all, when Lin-san asks, “Would you

like to see?” shouldn’t an acerbic, “Replay it,” be the reply? *grumble* The video appeared on the monitor. Unusual images were recorded of Hazuki-chan’s room and the corridor of the main building, and after that it was the cove side room. On both the screens of the main building, strange lights were reflected. It was something like dim, hazy lights. The light that appeared in Hazuki-chan’s room slowly floated around her futon and disappeared. The one that appeared in the corridor just quickly crossed the screen.

“What about the sound?”

“It is silence. There is no vibration. The other instruments are also within the range of normal values, however, the temperature dropped about five degrees.”

“What about the cove side room?”

“I will show it on the monitor.”

The camera that was placed in the cove side room was pointing straight towards the window. Occasionally, faint white lights were visible on the other side of the window. They were moving up from below.

...up from below.

“Are those spirit forms?”

“I do not know. Here as well, no change is seen other than the temperature.”

“What’s the temperature difference?”

“It is still five degrees.”

I secretly spoke to Akifumi-san.

“...the cave below...”

“Is something wrong?”

“Is there possibly a path beside the cave? A sort of path carved out of the cliff… with a stone stairway there that rises up to the side of the shop...”

Akifumi-san had a blank look.

“...did you go and have a look?”

So it’s there after all.

“Is the cave curved in the shape of a ‘く’ with a shrine in the back?”

“Did you go down to the bottom? You mustn't do that! That stone stairway is dangerous.”

Bou-san looked at me. “What’s wrong, Jou-chan?”

“I… sort of slipped out again.”

“Slipped out, you say…?”

“...it seems so...”

mumble

I talked about the second half of the dream without Naru. The content of the first half could not possibly be told to other people. Akifumi-san looked at me blankly.

“Then, spirit lights came drifting into the cave from the sea. There was even the spirit of some sort of fish or something.”

“The spirit of a fish?”

...well, I think it’s strange myself. But, even a fish is alive, and why not also a ghost fish if there’s a ghost cat?

“That cave is like that.”

It was said by Akifumi-san with a serious tone.

“Corpses flow in with relation to the tide.”

—eh?

“When someone dies in the surrounding sea, they drift into that cave. Especially people and large objects. Because of that, we have a shrine. The family dogs also washed up there.”

Bou-san frowned.

“I’d like to see. Could you guide me?”

Akifumi-san nodded and looked at the clock.

“There’s a little time until low-tide… It isn’t accessible until the tide ebbs unless you use the stone steps.”

“Incidentally, I’d also like to see where the stone steps are.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll guide you around here a little. The tide should ebb soon.”

2

Leaving only Lin-san to keep watch of Naru and the equipment, we exited the shop in a group and walked along the cove in the garden. There was a stone stairway, which was in the process of collapsing, in the very innermost of the cove. Since the middle of the stairs was becoming a mere steep slope, it would be close to almost impossible for people to use.

“Why is there a stone stairway in such a place?”

When Bou-san asked, Akifumi-san answered,

“I don’t really know, but it seems to be considerably old. Since it was here from the time when the shop was built. When my grandmother was a child, she went to the cave using this stone stairway. Though it seems it was already half broken since that time.”

Tentatively along the cove, there was a surrounding handrail and low fence, and at the exit of the stone stairway there was a decent iron gate. From the gate, there was a small distance until the stone stairway, and from this side of the fence the water surface of the cove was not visible.

“When was the shop built here?”

“I heard it was during my great-grandfather’s generation. Originally, there was a shop in Kanazawa, which likely transferred to here.”

“So up until that time, the family didn’t live here?”

“Right. But it’s likely that the location where the main household originally lived was here. My great-grandfather came here several times, and it seems because of that he decided to transfer the shop to here.”

“Do you know when the main household moved to this land?”

Akifumi-san tilted his head to one side.

“Let’s see, it was…The oldest person of those with a tomb in the family temple was born in the Ansei era. I know little before that. If you would like, I could ask my grandmother for you.”

“Please do. By the way, when was the Ansei era?”

Akifumi-san tilted his head.

“If I remember correctly, it was during the Edo period, but as for the details... anyway, it’s been a long time since I was tested on that.”

“Current high school students.”

Bou-san suddenly looked back at me.

“My school is still on the Genji and Heike war.”

“What about you, Masako? Don’t you go to school occasionally?”

Masako coldly looked the other way.

“Occasionally is more than enough. Mine is not yet out of the activity of Genji no Kimi.”

“Masako, you go to high school!?”

“May a junior high school graduate do as they please? Of course I go.”

Bou-san smiled smugly.

“It’s a certain famous high school for entertainers.”

Huh, is that so? As one would expect, a major medium is serious.

“I guess you’re essentially busy? You came quickly, didn’t you?”

When I asked, Masako blushed slightly.

“I am busy. I was still in the middle of supplementary lessons… I will say this in advance, however, that the supplementary lessons are to compensate for my attendance.”

Single-minded. So, you’re saying the reason you flew over was to see Naru. How touching. —hmm? Wait a minute!

“Masako, what do you wear when you go to school?”

When I asked, Masako's expression was sincerely scornful.

"There is a uniform of course. Or did you think I go to school in a kimono as well?"

I didn't think such a thing! Well, I was thinking something to the extent of, 'is it a Hakama?' *mumble* "That is the teahouse."

Akifumi-san raised his hand. Having come walking on the sidewalk of a large garden (I wonder what that is), a small building was visible before our eyes.

"Is the cove not completely visible from the garden?"

"On the opposite side of the tea house and flowers— we can go to the cape point. It's possible to see from there."

Exactly as was stated, when we walked farther past the teahouse, we came forth into a neat little garden, and we were able to look down at the cove from there. Beyond the low hedgerow was the cliff of the opposite shore and the building, which projected from the slope. A set of beams could be seen, which supported the building. And carved out of the rock surface below the set of beams, a narrow path extended. Right of the path was the crumbling stone stairway, and to the left was the gaping hole of the entrance of the cave.

"Do you want to go a little farther?"

Akifumi-san said so and opened a small door in the hedgerow using a key. From there until the cape point, short pine trees sparsely grew in the meadow.

"Beyond this point there aren't any fences, so please be careful."

Walking just a little bit fearfully, it was fifteen steps until the point. Although called a point, it was not a vertical, precipitous cliff, but more or less a gentle slope with shrubs growing there. Beyond the slope became a cliff, and from there it was the sea. To the right of the point, the crack's open mouth formed the entrance to the cove.

"When viewed from above, it doesn't even feel like that much of a cliff."

When Bou-san said, Akifumi-san smiled. Suddenly, Ayako said, "Hey, young master."

"Young master… But I won't actually succeed as the family head."

“I’m not worried about minor details. What are those?”

Ayako pointed to stones lined up between the pine trees. Five stones, each of which was about the size of an armful, were neatly arranged in a row.

“Oh, those? Even I don’t know that. My grandmother doesn’t seem to know either. They look like gravestones. I was told to leave them as they are and not touch them.”

“Oh.”

There were rocks of various sizes protruding from the sea. Waves were breaking white against them. In front, there were conspicuously large rocks. One like a hill and the other a little smaller. In that place, a sacred shrine rope on each tied them together. John pointed with his finger.

“Yoshimi-san, what are those?”

“That’s Okobu and Mekobu. Okobu is the large one and Mekobu is the small one.”

“Okobu and Mekobu… Is that a sacred shrine rope tying them together?”

“Yes. But I think it’s unrelated to any Shinto rituals. Since I think that rope is also rehung by local fishermen at New Year’s.”

After saying that, Akifumi-san spoke to me,

“You know, it’s said that those rocks are a man and women who became like that after jumping into the sea from here.”

I looked up at Akifumi-san.

“It’s a local legend. Although her exact name was forgotten, a long, long time ago, there was a certain princess in this land. The princess had a lover who was a local fisherman, but there came a man who coveted her.”

“Oh?”

“The man who coveted her was the son of a nearby noble and tried to force the princess to be his bride. The princess was unwilling and tried to escape with her lover. —They eloped. However, the letter with the written plans of the elopement had been secretly switched by the nobleman’s son, and the two did

not meet.”

I looked up at Akifumi-san with astonishment.

“The princess realized the mistake and, in a panic, went searching for her lover, and as for the lover, he had killed the nobleman’s son. He thought he had been betrayed since the princess had not come and the nobleman’s son came instead. The two were able to resolve the misunderstanding, however, it was too late. So, they jumped into the sea from this cape. The story says that the gods felt pity for them and, so that there would be no possibility of them being separated again, changed the lover into Okobu and the princess into Mekobu.”

That was the story… As I thought this, I inwardly blushed. I thought I was just being a bold woman. Was my role the princess? Moreover, was Akifumi-san the nasty nobleman’s son and Naru the fisherman? Unbelievable miscasting.

“Is there something wrong?”

Akifumi-san asked and I panicked.

“T-t-t-t-there isn’t anything, certainly.”

3

Upon walking back from the teahouse, there were trees growing densely out in front and some kind of roof could just slightly be seen peeking through there.

“Akifumi-san, what is that?”

“Oh, that’s the shrine. But it’s a small shrine without a Shinto priest.”

He said and dropped his gaze to his wristwatch.

“It’s still a little early. Would you like to go?”

With the tide not completely ebbed, Pumps Ayako and Kimono Masako said it was impossible to walk, so we headed to the shrine. For the time being, we exited the garden by going to the main building, and once we passed through the garden of the main building, we came out to the road. A torii gate was built a short distance away from the Yoshimi house gate.

The shrine was fairly neat. I thought it certainly would have been awfully dilapidated since Akifumi-san said it was unmanned. A little happily, Ayako said, “Ahh, what a splendid shrine. Though it hasn’t been cleaned properly.”

“Is it splendid? The cleaning is done by my family. We’ve been the caretakers for generations.”

It was a really small shrine that didn’t seem anywhere near splendid. There was a small sort of stage, and there was only a lattice door on the interior.

“Splendid, splendid. This is probably the shrine of a patron god.”

“What’s a patron god?”

“To put it briefly, a god of the land. It’s a village’s guardian god. There’s a kagura hall, or in other words, a place for ancient Shinto music and dancing.”

“Right. In autumn.”

Hmm.

“Young master, young master.”

Now called by Bou-san, Akifumi-san smiled wryly.

Bou-san pointed out three side-by-side tombstones located in the corner of the grounds and asked, “What’re those?”

“Those are the Tohachi mounds.”

“Tohachi mounds?”

“Tohachi mounds, written as eighteen. I’m not sure why, though. I think Tohachi is a sort of play on words since their also called the Sanroku mounds.”

“Why?”

When I asked and pulled on Akifumi-san’s shirt, he replied, “Three times six is eighteen, right?”

“Oh, I see.”

“No one knows why they’re called the Sanroku mounds. But three are here, right? And then there are the ones on the point of the cape.”

“Ah, it was five, wasn’t it?”

Akifumi-san nodded.

“Right. Therefore, there were six on the tip of that cape and maybe one was lost, is what my grandmother says.”

Bou-san was thoughtful.

“Lost mound, huh?”

John spoke to Bou-san,

“A mound in this case is a grave, isn’t it?”

“Exactly.”

“Is there a reason for it not being there? I wonder if it’s not related to the Yoshimi house incident.”

Ayako snapped her fingers.

“That’s it! That mound was the grave of a fox. And then, it was moved without

permission when the shop was built. That curse then...”

“I already came to the same conclusion.”

This was said by Bou-san and Ayako puffed her cheeks.

“Is that so!?”

“If it was Naru-bou, he’d probably say, ‘Don’t get ahead of yourself.’ What do you think, Masako?”

Masako tilted her head like a doll.

“What we are calling a fox is not truly a fox. I did not sense the presence of an animal. Not at the shop, nor at the mounds either. Spirits often tell lies, and when they are seen by human eyes, they will often appear taking the form of an animal.”

“Hmm. What else?”

Being asked, Masako made a serious face.

“I feel the presence of many spirits. I do not know what kind of spirits they are. However, I wonder if they’re not a kind of wandering spirit.”

“Masako. Does that mean you don’t know this time either?”

Masako looked away from Bou-san’s amazed expression. And then, “This is a strange place. I do not sense anything good, but on the other hand, I do not sense anything bad.”

...Wait a minute. Those words.

“I sensed a strange power inside the house as well, however, what I felt was a mix of something very bad and something very good. I have a memory of such a feeling... ”

“Sacred ground?”

When I asked, Masako opened her eyes wide.

“...Yes. That’s right. Previously, when I went to America, I had gone to sacred Native American ground. This feeling is very similar to the feeling of that place.”

“Masako, you’ve been to foreign countries?”

Ah, wealthy people.

“Only once. I attended a seance by invitation of ASPR.”

“ASPR?”

“It’s an American psychic research society. At that time, I had gone to a place referred to as Native American holy ground. This was where Native American souls gathered. It was a sacred place protected by spirits, but it was also the source of a curse that would bring calamity to those who defiled it. The spirits of many were wandering… It’s very similar to the feeling of that place.”

A place to gather souls…

Bou-san looked back in the direction of the cape behind us.

“In any case, I still want to take a look at that cave.”

***

In front of the shop entrance was a beautiful garden. The low hedgerow continued here as well, and beyond was the coast. There was a break at a point in the hedgerow and from there, concrete stairs extended down to the coast. While clinging to the steel handrail, we descended the long stairway along the cliff. At the bottom was a coastline full of pebbles and rocks. Slightly offshore from the coast, there was an area where various sized rocks projected in countless numbers from the surface of the sea. It stretched directly parallel along the coast, and surging waves crashed against the rocks there, halting their momentum, which resulted in the coastline becoming very calm.

“Beautiful water.”

The seawater was clear like glass.

“Here it is.”

Akifumi-san indicated the base of the cliff, which he had now descended. At the base of the cliff, something like a path had been made, which had things such as rocks and stones piled up. We walked along the path, being careful so as to not slip. The path ran along the circumference of the cliff and going around it, the tip of the cliff could be easily reached. From the tip, we walked along a rock and arrived at the entrance of the cave. The tide had completely ebbed, but

nevertheless, the water had only fallen to about ankle depth at most, and as a result, Ayako fussed even more. Thus, I told her not to come dressed pretentiously during investigations.

The cave was exactly the same as what I saw in my dream. The ground was covered with stones like a dry riverbed. In the case of the identical bend around the middle, there was also the same small shrine in exact area inside of the bend. However, looking at the shrine now, there wasn't the same distortion. Although small, the cleaning was thorough. A clean, orderly shrine.

"Masako, how about here?"

When I asked in a whisper, Masako looked up at the high ceiling.

"It's the same. That mountain and— the sacred ground I saw in America, it's the same feeling."

Hearing muttering, I looked back at the cave entrance.

"Even now, spirits are flowing in."

Bou-san looked inside of the shrine.

"Do you also do the cleaning for this, young master?"

"Yes. As well as the main building's Buddhist household altar and the shop's Shinto household altar… Since my family is fussy, my childhood was difficult."

"Oh?"

"If it's child's help, it means cleaning and that sort, right? Childhood was unpleasant."

"Tell me about it. My house was a temple, too."

"What about you, Ayako?"

I tried asking.

"Was your house also a shrine, Ayako? Was it difficult?"

"Sorry to disappoint. My home wasn't apart of a shrine."

"That wasn't the case!?"

If that's so, then why are you a miko!?

“I never had to help. On top of being raised as a young lady, I was spoiled as an only child.”

“...you admit it yourself. Well, what does your family do, Ayako?”

When I asked, Ayako smiled and combed back her hair.

“Ah, doctors.”

EEK!

“As in the wealthy and prestigious doctors?”

“Yes. Since we were running a private general hospital, you might say wealthy. Everything was done by a maid.”

Why is such a wealthy young woman acting as a miko? When I tried to ask, Bou-san raised his voice.

“Young master, what’s inside here?”

Bou-san was looking inside so that his nose was pressed against the small lattice door of the shrine. Saying, ‘Ah,’ Akifumi-san opened the shrine.

“It’s driftwood. At least, that’s what I think it probably is.”

Contained inside was a wooden stick about thirty centimeters in height. Near the top was rounded and it appeared to be in the shape of a person. There were two small projections that looked like little hands.

“It’s called ‘Okobu-sama.’”

“‘Okobu,’ like the rock?”

“I don’t know… I think it’s different from that. Doesn’t it look like a human somewhat with a head and hands? Also, doesn’t it look like this?”

Akifumi-san lightly raised one hand while hanging the other hand slightly out in front.

“Ah, I see.”

“This is a common pose of Buddha statues, right? I think that’s why it’s enshrined.”

4

“Is it an Ebisu?”

Right after returning to the base, Bou-san muttered then spoke to Lin-san.

“Abnormalities?”

“None so far.”

“I see. Hey, Lin-san. Can’t we put equipment in the cave below?”

After he asked, Lin-san contemplated the situation of the cave.

“As long as there is no concern of seawater, we can set it up, but what about the power... ”

“Oh, I see.”

“The battery only holds two hours, and only one is available. There is the manual interval timer as well.”

“Interval timer?”

“It is a device that can be switched ON/OFF at regular time intervals. For example, it is sufficient to only record at hourly intervals. In that way, at best, it will allow us to record for half a day or so. ”

“However, that means there’s also the possibility that the switch will be turned off during a vital point.”

“Yes. —Ah, approximately how high is the cliff?”

Akifumi-san answered with, ‘About ten meters.’

“If that’s the case, we can probably lower the cable from here somehow. As long as no effort is spared to bring in the equipment afterwards.”

Ugh. Seems difficult…

—For this reason, we performed rigorous, heavy labor from there. We carried

the equipment in a great hurry while the tide was out. Since we couldn't go across the rocky stretch and carry the equipment on our shoulders, we walked in the water *splash splash* while circumventing the rocks. If the equipment got soaked by water, then it would be a serious matter. As such, I was dripping cold sweat. We couldn't even use the supply cart.

Akifumi-san jumped into the cove in order to catch the cable that was lowered from the window of our base and pulled it up to the cave for me. If not for Akifumi-san, it would have been fairly difficult work to deliver the cable without getting the connector wet. The equipment was wrapped in vinyl to avoid getting wet and we built a simple tent. …*dizzy* Then, when we had at last finished the setup, the tide had risen and having no choice but to return, we were submerged in water up to the waist.

***

"Hey, Bou-san, what's an 'Ebisu'?"

After finishing the setup, we took showers and returned to base. Then I tried asking.

"Ebisu?"

Ayako and Masako, who did not participate in the setup, took John to go examine Hazuki-chan's condition.

"A little while ago, you said, 'Ebisu.'"

"Oh, is that so? In short, 'Ebisu' is flotsam."

"Flotsam… "

"An unusual object that's drifted to the coast. Things like underwater rocks or dead bodies, sharks or whales. Anyhow, when an uncommon object turns up on the coast, it used to be a custom of fishing villages to gratefully accept this as a sign of a good catch. Apparently, this type of flotsam was originally called 'Ebisu.' Especially unusually shaped rocks or favorably shaped driftwood. Those sorts of objects were said to be harbingers of good things and were worshipped with utmost devotion. That driftwood, 'Okobu-sama,' would also be so. Actually, a shrine's object of worship is sometimes flotsam."

“Really?”

“On the other hand, an ‘Ebisu’ was sometimes a harbinger of bad things. For example, things such as typhoons and tsunami. So you might say, in the beginning, an ‘Ebisu’ was the deification of an ‘object from the sea.’ Originally, it was written with the character ‘夷’. Later on it became the god of prosperous business and even the word began to be written with the special characters, ‘恵比寿.’”

...object from the sea…

“Originally, there was a belief in Japan of ‘Tokoyo.’ Put simply, ‘Tokoyo’ was a country of immortality. It was believed to be a place that existed far beyond the sea. An ‘object from the sea’ was thought to have come from ‘Tokoyo.’”

Yikes. The Japanese are strange.

“Ebisu, Okobu-sama, lost mound...”

Bou-san muttered and stood up.

“I’m going to borrow the phone for a minute.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We alone are unreliable.”

Huh?

***

Bou-san left, and when I was alone with Lin-san, the conversation wasn’t even encouraged further, so I decided to go outside for a while and wander aimlessly. I went to the stairs that go down to the coast and sat down. I watched the coast grow considerably smaller than it was a little while ago.

...object from the sea.

‘Okobu-sama’ that was washed ashore and drifting spirits. A cave and sacred ground. A shrine and a house. Two rocks with a legend. A couple throwing themselves into the sea.

—Could that sacred ground be the cause?

I thought in this manner.

—Or, could it be something related to that legend?

Until listening to Akifumi-san a little while ago, I didn't know the legend. The fact that I saw that sort of dream surely has some meaning. Not to mention, since Naru said he, "showed the direction of the dream," that's probably what he wanted to inform me about. If that's the case, the legend can't have nothing to do with this incident.

Or could there be a connection to the other part of that dream? That dream where we ran away and were surrounded without a way to escape. I wonder why we didn't jump into the sea. According to the legend, we were supposed to throw ourselves into the sea. In the dream, I also thought, 'I wonder why it's not the sea.' And that brief phrase.

—Cursed until the end of days.

"What information did you want me to know?"

Then it occurred to me.

—Could the dreams I've seen up till now possibly be entirely Naru "showing the direction" for me?

Despite how much I thought about it, I didn't really know. When I returned to the store, my brain was in a muddled state. Bou-san was using the phone at the reception desk that was located where you enter the front door.

"Hey. Didn't you go somewhere luxurious?"

...I wonder who he intended to call.

"It's a bad place for enjoyment, but it's become a bit of a difficult situation. I want you to lend a hand. Can you come?"

After a moment, Bou-san spoke,

"Come. The manpower is really needed. —Tomorrow? There are probably still flights today. Since you don't need any luggage, get on an airplane today by any means."

Airplane?

“Unless there’s a direct one, get on a connecting flight. At any rate, I want you to arrive as early as possible.”

What a underhanded way of calling. I wonder who on earth is on the phone. They seem like a close acquaintance. Eh? Perhaps… is it?

I smiled complacently, but when I tried to return to base, the clatter of panicked footsteps was heard. When I looked back, it was Akifumi-san. His complexion had turned pale.

He dived at the reception desk, then uttered a cry similar to a scream.

“Takigawa-san, my older brother—”

Chapter 4 - Calamity

1

His “older brother” was Yasutaka-san, the second son.

He was the person who was originally very cheerful, however, recently he’s been depressed for some reason.

When we rushed into Yasutaka-san’s room, it was stained with patches of thick, viscous blood. A futon was laid to one side of one of the two six tatami mat divisions and Yasutaka-san was sprawled there. The family had crowded around him. Both of his hands were thrown out atop the futon and his wrists were marred with deep, horrific wounds. The futon was soaked in blood. A utility knife laid abandoned on his chest.

I felt dizzy. The smell of the blood made me nauseous.

Bou-san leapt into the room. He pushed aside a sobbing Hiroe-obasan and leaned over Yasutaka-san’s bedside, then he immediately stood up and opened the dresser.

“Young master, did you call an ambulance?”

“I called.”

Bou-san pulled neck ties out from the inside of the dresser and with them, tightly bound the upper part of Yasutaka-san’s arms.

He’s still okay. He’s still… breathing. We’ve mostly stopped the bleeding, so surely he won’t die.

Before I was aware of what I was doing, I had tightly clasped my fingers together. Left in a daze and unable to move, someone poked me.

“Is Yasu-ojichan dead?”

Wakako-chan asked with an innocent face.

“Hey, is he dead?”

Their expressions were like they were seeking pleasant news. I didn't know how to reply to that. Wakako-chan looked at me as if surprised and then met eyes with Katsuki-kun.

"He's still alive."

"Whaat!"

The pair were truly frightening with their innocently bored-looking expressions. Would they prefer it if their uncle died? I tried to ask, but I was afraid to hear the answer. The pair left me, who could not speak, and ran down the corridor while whispering secretly. The sound of ambulance sirens blared.

***

Yasutaka-san was taken to a nearby hospital. 'I'm going crazy,' he had said after he regained consciousness. Akifumi-san, who stayed by Yasutaka-san's side and went to the hospital, told us this after he came back.

"It seems he was hearing voices when he was alone. He said they ordered him to kill the family."

Akifumi-san's facial expression held a deep look of grief.

"It seems he saw dreams when he was sleeping. Dreams where he would kill the family. He said he remembered the feel of stabbing people because the dreams continued excessively. The content being such, my brother couldn't tell anyone. Then he said... at this rate he thought he might actually kill us someday."

Bou-san, who had listened to the story with a grave expression, bowed his head.

"If he had been discovered too late, then he would have become the first victim. I'm sincerely sorry for our lack of assistance."

"...No. The disaster with Shibuya-san was because of us as well."

After lightly shaking his head, Bou-san stood up and opened the adjacent sliding door.

There was no change in the appearance of the room. The solitary futon was

spread out and Naru was sleeping. After overlooking the room, Bou-san looked back at Lin-san.

“You left your shiki around Naru-bou, right?”

“Yes.”

“Would you know if a spirit approached Naru’s vicinity?”

“I would know.”

“Well, what about the opposite? Would you know if a spirit left Naru?”

Lin-san widened his eyes slightly.

“Of course I would know. For one thing, it’s impossible for the spirit to leave because of the spell effect placed on him.”

“That means...”

Bou-san looked around at us.

“There isn’t just one spirit haunting this house. That’s what it means.”

“Wait a minute!”

Ayako exclaimed.

“Then, are you saying Yasutaka-san is possessed?”

“Another is probably unthinkable, but...”

Surely…

“Caution is necessary with the rest of the family as well. Because there’s also the possibility that there isn’t just one spirit, but three or more. —John.”

“Yes.”

“How was Hazuki-chan’s condition?”

“It wasn’t clear to me, however, Hara-san said there is a possibility this is a malicious evil spirit. For the time being, we’ve performed a simple exorcism and sealed the room.”

“Was there a response?”

“I don’t know.”

“Masako. —Do you know what kind of spirit this thing is?”

Masako shook her head.

“I do not know. However, it had the same feeling as that spirit that is possessing Naru. If I had to say, it is perhaps hollow.”

“Hollow?”

“Yes. It neither feels resentment nor bears a grudge. If that is the possessing spirit, then it is a very empty spirit. ”

“What about you, Mai?”

He suddenly spoke to me and I got flustered.

“Ah, me?”

“Don’t you feel anything? Anything is fine. Was there anything that caught your attention from out of yesterday’s dream?”

I was slightly hesitant, then I cautiously spoke.

“It seems to conflict with Masako’s opinion, but I think there were people who died bearing a grudge.”

...always be cursed until the end of days…

“I think they were people who were cruelly betrayed. They were surrounded by their adversaries and killed.”

There was the pair who committed suicide by throwing themselves into the sea from the cape. If that’s case…

“I think those were probably the people who died in this area. I suspect there’s at least a connection to the land.”

Masako scowled.

“Certainly not! If it was that kind of spirit, I would have recognized it.”

“Well, perhaps it was simply a dream.”

“It was a dream!”

Jeez, you’re fussy.

Bou-san turned his head towards Akifumi-san.

“What do you think? Do you know anything about it?”

“...I’m sorry, but… I’ve never heard that kind of story. Although, it may be that I just don’t know.”

“I see. Did you find out around when the Yoshimi family moved here?”

“I’m sorry. It seems even my grandmother doesn’t know anything beyond what I told you.”

Bou-san contemplated for a moment. Then,

“John. Go to the hospital and attempt an exorcism on Yasutaka-san. While you’re at it, mind your own business and speak minimally. So you don’t make a fool of yourself again.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“Ayako, make charms. Enough for each of us and the family.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m going out for a little bit. Akifumi-san, I’m sorry, but could you please guide me to the family temple?”

2

Ayako drew charms and, with Masako's and my help, walked around distributing them to the people of Yoshimi house. We requested that they please not remove them from their persons by any means. Youko-san accepted one and immediately threw it away with an indifferent attitude. She was the mother of Katsuki-kun and Hazuki-chan, and the wife of the eldest son, Kazuyasu-san.

"Excuse me, please do not remove the charm from your person. You can store it in a charm bag or something similar, or by any means..."

When I said this, Youko-san smiled calmly.

"If I wear this, will there be any effect?"

"Yes, it's a charm that repels evil spirits. There's no effect if you remove it from your person."

"But, what about when I take a bath?"

Eh?

"I cannot take it into the bath, it's paper. If an evil spirit approaches while I'm bathing, isn't there nothing that can be done?"

"That's true, but… it's dangerous. Please keep it with you so it's less dangerous, even if by a little."

When I said this, Youko-san smiled.

"All right. I will do so."

While saying so, she didn't even look at the charm. I left Youko-san's room feeling somewhat dissatisfied.

When I tried to give charms to Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan, they ran away.

"I don't need something like that."

“Wait a minute. This is important. Please.”

“No.”

“I don’t need it.”

While chasing the pair, who were running away, I got a strange feeling. Why were they running away? Why did they hate the charms? We exited the main building and came forth into the shop. The pair jumped outside through the entranceway.

“Hey, Wakako-chan!”

I called out to the two who ran off to the front yard.

“Did you know your uncle died?”

When I told that big lie, the pair abruptly stopped. They looked back at me with blank looks on their faces. They immediately beamed in delight.

“Really?”

“He went to the hospital? Riding in the ambulance?”

“Yes. But they didn’t make it in time. Your uncle died at the hospital.”

Katsuki-kun murmured quietly.

“Hooray!”

...these children…no way…

I deliberately spoke in a whisper.

“And Akifumi-san also...”

“Aki-niisan, too? What happened?”

The pair raised their voices in unison. They came back two, three steps in this direction.

“What should I do? Should I tell you?”

“Tell us, tell us.”

“Hmm…but I thought I might keep it secret.”

When I mumbled indecisively, the pair drew nearer.

“Hey, oneesan, tell us.”

“Tell us! Did Aki-niisan die, too?”

“Well… ”

“Is he dead? Did he ride in the car?”

“Car… ”

The two of them pulled on my skirt. I quickly caught the pair’s hands.

“What do you mean by car?”

“Let me go!”

“Let me go!”

“I won’t let go! Hey, what did you mean by car!?”

The pair struggled. I clutched their hands desperately.

“Mai? What are you doing?”

Ayako and Masako, and then Teruka-san, came running. Katsuki-kun escaped from my hand. I adjusted my grip on Wakako-chan, who tried to escape along with him.

Katsuki-kun looked back from a slight distance away.

“Let go of Wakako-chan!”

“No. Tell me why you said car.”

“I said let go of her!”

I looked to Ayako who was in a fluster off to the side.

“Ayako, make Wakako-chan hold this charm.”

“Don’t do that!”

I glared at Katsuki-kun.

“Then tell me about the car. Or else we’ll stick this charm to Wakako-chan so that it won’t come off.”

“If you do that, I’ll jump into the sea!”

“....Katsuki-kun, do you know what you’re saying?”

It wasn’t even five meters from the front yard until the stairs that went down to coast.

“I know! If I die, everyone will suffer because of it.”

“I think it will be painful if you die.”

“I know that! If it’s painful, then it serves them right!”

“Who does it serve right?”

“Everyone.”

I pressed against Wakako-chan who was struggling with Ayako.

“Ayako, hold onto her. —Katsuki-kun, who are you really?”

I came out from the front door. Katsuki-kun withdrew one step while glaring at me.

“You’re not Katsuki-kun, are you? The real Katsuki-kun wouldn’t say something like that. And he wouldn’t be afraid of charms.”

“I’m not afraid!”

“You’re lying! You’re scared, aren’t you? That’s why you hate even holding a charm, isn’t it?”

Katsuki-kun smiled. By no means did it seem like a child’s smile.

“I’ll kill.”

“Kill who?”

“You, as well as everyone with you. Everyone in this family, too.”

I gently lifted my hand. (—It shouldn’t be used on a person.) “This child, too.”

Katsuki-kun— the being inside of him said this and laughed.

“Why?”

My hand was trembling. (But there was the time I did it to Taka. That was a joke, though.) “Jumping into the sea would be merciful. When compared to having your head cut off, it’ll be pleasant.”

“Head...cut off?”

Am I sure this time is okay? (—Don’t do it again. Because it was Mai-grade, nothing happened.) “Compared to the betrayal by one’s comrades.”

“What did the people of this house do to you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“...leave that child.”

“The child will be of no use if he dies. I’ll leave if that happens.”

Katsuki turned laughing. He started running from that spot. A distance no more than five meters.

“Naumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!”

Please stop Katsuki-kun!

“Rin Pyou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen!”

I swung down the sword seal and Katsuki-kun fell down. There was slightly less than one meter until the stairs. And at the same time, something shrouded in wind rushed past the side of my face and off behind me at a furious speed.

“...what?”

Even though I looked around, there was nothing. Suddenly, Wakako-chan began to cry as if on fire. I hurriedly rushed over to where Katsuki-kun was. When I took Katsuki-kun into my arms from where he had fallen, he began to cry in a tone similar to a scream.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry...”

3

Since the pair would not stop crying, we decided to examine them and found that severe burns had developed on Katsuki-kun's back— and strangely, Wakako-chan's as well. A cross striped blister had developed there exactly like I had cut the nine syllables. It was by no means large, but it was probably unbearably painful.

The pair, who had finally calmed and were being treated in the living room, wore blank looks as if nothing had happened. They were merely fiddling with the charms they were made to hold in curiosity. Masako had folded the charms and put them inside of charm bags, which were sewn from handkerchiefs, and when she had put them around their necks, they had been somewhat delighted.

I apologized profusely for injuring the pair. When Hiroe-obasan brought back the medicine box, I begged on my knees for her forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry!"

Teruka-san, who was watching this scene, interceded.

"It's thanks to you that both Katsuki and Wakako are safe. Please do not worry about it."

No, is it okay to call this safe…? As I was breaking into a cold sweat, a small hand touched my arm.

"Oneesan, are you getting scolded?"

It was Wakako-chan.

"Yeah. That's right."

"It's no good unless you apologize gently."

"Uh… I'm sorry."

When I bowed my head, Wakako-chan pulled the amulet bag from under her

blouse.

“Good job. Does oneesan want me to lend this as a reward, too?”

tears Cute!

“Thank you. But that’s for Wakako-chan. You must never remove it.”

“Even when I change clothes?”

“Even when you change clothes.”

I nodded yes in all seriousness and Wakako-chan skillfully tucked away the charm bag in her clothes as if hiding a treasure. Just as she was smiling with evident satisfaction, Taizou-ojisan returned.

“The car… it’s brake oil had leaked out.”

Worried about the word ‘car’, I asked them to examine all of the cars.

“It was the car I was personally using… If I had driven it without noticing, it would have resulted in an accident.”

I sighed deeply… that was a relief.

—However, the situation wasn’t entirely okay. Bou-san, who returned after dark, scolded me.

“I warned you not to use it on a person like that!”

“It couldn’t be helped!”

“Don’t bother arguing!!”

sob Bou-san’s being cruel.

After sighing, Bou-san spoke in a quiet voice.

“Repulsion magic isn’t something that’s effective for anyone using it.”

...huh?

“You have the aptitude for an exorcist… so, don’t ever do it again. Never again create a situation where you’re required to cut the nine syllables towards a person.”

“Okay… sorry.”

He patted my head then looked towards Ayako and Masako.

“Anyone else? Was there anyone who refused to receive a charm?”

“Nao-san.”

Nao-san… she was the older sister just above Akifumi-san.

“Although I should say, that was only because Nao-san wasn’t here. And the young master. For the same reason. —Speaking of which, young master, please take this charm.”

With a smile, Akifumi-san accepted the charm proffered by Ayako. Good, he accepted it properly.

“Where did Nao-neesan go?”

“Um… everyone was searching for her since we didn’t hear a destination.”

...oh?

“Mai, how was it? Was it only the little kids who wouldn’t accept charms?”

Hearing him, I was about to say Youko-san gave me a strange feeling. I was unable to finish saying so because, at that moment, the Youko-san in question came into the room.

“—?”

Youko-san barged into the base without announcing herself and looked around at us.

“Who hurt the children?”

Oh… a grievance….? Uh-oh.

“Who did that to Katsuki? And on top of that, you made him hold that strange thing.”

Strange thing?

“That worthless charm. Take it off right now.”

“Uhh, but...”

“You taught him something strange. Even if I tell that child to take it off, he won’t take it off. Take it off!”

Youko-san shouted.

“You also did something to Hazuki. And Wakako, and Yasutaka and Eijirou.”

We stared intently at Youko-san, who was ranting. ...this person is…

“All of this is unnecessary!”

Bou-san stood and picked up a charm.

“This is something necessary to protect yourself. Youko-san, do you have one?”

Youko-san laughed.

“Something like that isn’t useful.”

Bou-san held out the charm.

“That’s not true.... please take this.”

Youko-san silently accepted it— then it suddenly flared up. The charm burned above Youko-san’s hand as if it had spontaneously burst into flames.

“...it’s useless.”

Youko-san laughed. It was a wicked type of laugh.

“These things are completely useless.”

We slowly approached and put ourselves on guard in order to surround Youko-san.

“Ayako, Shichi Baku”

“All right.”

Youko-san frowned.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. We just need your presence for a moment.”

Ayako moved her fingers. She cut the nine syllables. Five horizontal and four vertical. She quietly chanted something with her mouth.

“What is it…?”

“Not bad…. John.”

When he was called, John sprinkled holy water. Youko-san, who took two, three steps backwards with a frown, was caught from behind by Lin-san.

“Let go!”

John lightly cut a cross.

“I accost thee, damned and most impure spirit, cause of malice, essence of crimes, origin of sins, thee who revel in deceit, sacrilege, adultery, and murder.”

John extended his hand towards Youko-san, who widened her eyes. He drew a cross towards Youko-san’s chest.

“I adjure thee in Christ’s name,”

He drew a cross towards her forehead.

“That, in whatsoever part of the body thou art hiding, thou shalt declare thyself, that thou shalt flee the body that thou hast occupied.”

Towards her right ear.

“Thou shalt depart, wheresoever thou dost lurk, and never more seek out bodies dedicated to God.”

Towards her left ear.

“Let these holy bodies be forbidden to thee forever, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Towards her mouth. Then he held up his hand to gently touch her eyes.

“In Principio.”

Youko-san’s legs failed her and she collapsed. She slumped down on the spot supported by Lin-san. When Youko-san opened her eyes, which had been tightly closed, she wore a surprised expression.

“...eh? What?”

John smiled at Youko-san, who was in dismay. He lightly kissed the cross he held in his hand and put it around Youko-san’s neck.

“You’re alright now. Please wear this and do not remove it.”

4

Since Youko-san remembered nothing from the time we came to this house to now, Akifumi-san had to explain the situation from scratch.

“Hey, hey, Ayako. What’s Shichi Baku?”

When I asked that during diner, which we were taking in shifts, Ayako replied, “That’s an immobility technique.”

“Is that what Lin-san cast on Naru?”

Hearing that, Ayako frowned.

“No way. It isn’t powerful enough to put others to sleep. It only works to the extent of making people a little lethargic and making it difficult to move.”

Ahh. Still, considering it was Ayako, it was amazing that she was useful.

“When you used Shichi Baku, didn’t you cut the nine syllables? You directed it towards Youko-san, but was that okay?”

‘Ah,’ Ayako smiled.

“The nine syllables was originally referred to as the defensive nine syllables and was something used to protect yourself.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“I taught you the fast nine syllables. It’s the one that’s more easily done actually. It’s done during prayer. Ultimately, you use that when you do things such as prayer and training to prevent the intrusion of evil spirits. So originally, it was a method of self-defense. When you use it, don’t you essentially shout and push away from your center with the sword seal? If it’s done in that way, then it can also be used as a kind of attack. When you shout, you’re firing your willpower.”

“I see… Then are things like exorcism ultimately manipulating your willpower

somehow?”

“That’s so. In the end, chanting spells and using tools are just rituals for efficiently boosting your willpower.”

“Then isn’t it meaningless?”

Ayako rested her chin in one hand.

“Hmm… perhaps it’s meaningless. It doesn’t necessarily mean you can’t do it if you don’t use them. For example, if someone uses the wrong mantra, there isn’t any issue from making a mistake…. well, that’s what I think.”

“Ah.”

“There’s a method from China called Qigong. This is Kung Fu that manipulates your willpower. It can be used to cure illness or move objects, and on top of that, it can be used to defeat people that are far away without even touching them.”

“Isn’t that what PK is?”

Ayako looked back at me.

“Ah, is that so? That’s true. Curing illnesses is PK-LT and defeating far away people is PK-ST. Then that means PK is in fact willpower.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“There are few who know that method. I’m not even familiar with Qigong techniques. People who are said to have mastered it are truly amazing, although I’ve never seen it. They can break rocks without even touching them, bend iron, cure cancer, and they even seem to be able to manipulate human beings. It seems some people can do exorcisms with Qigong.”

“Wow...”

“Surprisingly, Lin can probably do it.”

“Yeah, you can say that again.”

After the pair of us laughed, we looked at each other.

“Naru!”

Could there be a possibility that Naru is a master of Qigong techniques?

“It would be useless to even tie him if he knew Qigong.”

“There would be no point even if he was confined. That is dangerous.”

“Then certainly there’s no choice but to keep him asleep.”

“Is that so? Now I understand.”

I see. One question was solved.

Ayako nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s true. Otherwise, Naru wouldn’t even have to practice religious purification and—”

“Oh!”

I clapped my hands.

“What?”

“There’s a question I’ve had for a long time.”

“Hmmm?”

“A while ago, when we went to investigate at Taka’s school, wasn’t there a situation where Naru and I fell into a hole?”

“There was, there was.”

“There was a manhole, and it was full of rubble that had fallen into the hole. I thought it was strange that the reason we weren’t injured much was because we just so happened to fall somewhere that didn’t have any chunks of concrete.”

“Why?”

“After all, we had fallen from the manhole, right? Even the rubble had fallen from the manhole. I thought it was inevitable that we would get injured since both us and the rumble pretty much fell from the same spot.”

“Is that so? Naturally, rubble should have been strewn about the place you had fallen.”

“Right? There wasn’t any debris there.”

“Someone must have either broke it or moved it out of the way.”

“I know, right?”

“Hehehe.”

We finally caught his tail. Ayako and I continued to laugh giddily for a little while.

“Eh? But wait a minute.”

Ayako abruptly tilted her head in puzzlement.

“But, if he’s able to use Qigong techniques, why wasn’t he able to fight off that fox-like thing when it sprang at him?”

“Hmm? You have a point… ”

Come to think of it, Lin-san had said something. Something like, “Don’t do it!”

“I wonder if there’s a reason he shouldn’t use Qigong techniques… ”

In the end, Ayako and I were greatly perplexed.

5

Nao-san hadn’t come back, and it had become a problem since it was approaching midnight.

“It's impossible to not come home until such time without notice.”

Hiroe-obasan and the others began to make an uproar, but when we inquired, no one had seen Nao-san go out. It turned out that even when we tried searching her room, her purse and such had been left behind and we just could not think of where she had gone. Bou-san and John helped by searching the neighborhood, but the figure of Nao was not found. Bou-san and John returned to the base after one in the morning. The moon couldn’t even be seen through the thick clouds in the night sky.

“How did it go?”

When I asked, Bou-san and John shook their heads.

“If she doesn’t return tomorrow, we’ll submit a search request.”

The mood became deeply somber.

Just as I nodded, Lin-san, who had been watching the equipment, raised his voice.

“Takigawa-san. —Look here.”

Saying so, he pointed out the monitor. It was the video of the camera that was placed in the cave. The entrance of the cave was visible to the left of the screen… there were no abnormalities in particular. Was there something?

Bou-san fixed his eyes on the screen, then he stood up in hurry.

“Lin, is there a flashlight?”

“I put one in the car.”

“John, come on.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Mai, you and the others stay here. Young master, I’m entrusting this place to you.”

After seeing off the three people, who left in a rush, I exchanged a look with Ayako.

Was there something wrong in the video of the cave? I stared at the screen again, but I didn’t see anything abnormal in the cave. Only the deserted space was projected with that strangely pale tone characteristic of the high sensitivity camera.

“I wonder what it is.”

I tilted my head in thought at Ayako’s words.

“....there’s nothing. Even if something strange shows up on video, that doesn’t necessarily mean something strange is going on… ”

I broke off mid-sentence and my eyes fixed on the entrance of the cave. At the rocky stretch outside the entrance, white waves were lapping against the protruding rocks. Something was caught there so that it was being washed by the waves.

“What’s that there?”

I stared further, but I couldn’t tell what it was. It repeatedly retreated and hit the rocks.

As I was desperately straining my eyes, the video showed Bou-san and the others rush in. Bou-san headed straight for the thing that was caught in the rocky area. There was something after all…

Akifumi-san stood up half-way.

I switched over the speaker. Bou-san and the others were keeping silent. No sound could be heard from the speakers except the sound of the waves.

Bou-san pulled the thing up while getting swallowed by the waves. With Lin-san, the thing was carried between the pair.

Ayako screamed. Akifumi-san rushed out of the room.

The video was coarse and I couldn’t see well. Even so, I knew that it was a person. As we watched, the person’s body was washed by the waves without resistance. I don’t think that person is alive.

(—Corpses flow in with relation to the tide) Nao-san had not come back. We could not think of where she had gone.

I closed my eyes. Please be someone else. Let it be someone completely unrelated.

—Still, I also knew there could not be such a chance.

***

It was undoubtedly Nao-san. She was carried by the tide until it had reached that cave. The police were called and Nao-san was carried away. We heard that she underwent an autopsy.

“I would hate to be dissected by someone… even if it was a woman… ”

I was in the base holding my knees. Ayako patted my back consolingly.

The sound of the waves flowing could still be heard from the speaker. I realized for the first time that the sound of waves was actually a lonesome sound.

Bou-san and the others, who had finished changing their clothes, returned after a while wearing sullen expressions.

“Thanks for your hard work… I made coffee.”

“Thanks.”

No one had anything more to say than that.

I finished distributing the coffee and just as everyone had started to drink, Bou-san spoke at long last.

“Masako-chan.”

“Yes?”

“Can you summon Nao-san?”

Masako looked back at Bou-san with a start.

“I think I can, but… ”

“Lin said it’s a bad day for him. I’m sorry, but will you do it?”

“I will try to do what I can.”

“Mai, go to the main building and ask only for these things.”

After he said this, Bou-san began to write a note. Nao-san’s birthdate, blood type, hobbies, favorite artist, money in her purse, where she went on a trip recently, *etc.*

“...how should I ask for these things?”

“Go now. Don’t say anything about a seance. They don’t need to know about something they won’t understand. —Masako, is there anything you need to prepare?”

6

I asked the endless list of questions as I was instructed to do, and when I returned to the base, the inside of the room was already prepared. Although I say prepared, there was only a candle and an incense, and the rest was the equipment for recording.

“Have you asked?”

“Yeah. Although, I only filled out about half.”

“That’s enough.”

While handing over the note to Bou-san, I asked, “But why’d you really want me to ask those things?”

“If Nao-san is summoned, it’s necessary to determine that no mistakes were made.”

Oh, I see.

“If that’s the case, should we have Akifumi-san come? Wouldn’t it be easy if it was ascertained by him?”

“That’ll be trouble.”

“Why? I think Akifumi-san will certainly want to see her, too.”

“It won’t do.”

I was slightly annoyed.

“Why? I think Nao-san might surely say, ‘If I knew this would suddenly happen, I would have told you so much.’ Am I right? ...hey, answer me!”

Bou-san looked at me. He had a very serious expression.

“Nao-san didn’t necessarily die in an accident.”

“...what do you mean?”

“I’ll speak plainly. There’s a possibility she was killed by someone in this house.”

“Bou-san!”

“When you guys handed out charms, Nao-san was already gone. At that point, it seems three people were possessed. Youko-san and the two children. It might not have been an accident or suicide. Do you think the young master would want to hear it if Youko-san killed her?”

“...what?”

Bou-san sighed.

“I’d prefer it if that wasn’t the case, too. So, Masako will summon her to make sure of it. The family aren’t allowed to participate. Got it?”

“...Got it.”

***

We all surrounded the low table. The candle and incense were lit and the lights were turned out. Masako, who sat heavily in a zaisu chair, closed her eyes and put her hands together. Then she began to quietly chant what appeared to be a sutra.

“Avalokitesh...Bodhisattva, while...Perfection of..., ...five...empty...”

Masako’s posture immediately collapsed. Her always precisely straightened spine had become slightly stooped, but soon after, she leaned her back heavily against the back of the zaisu chair. Her words were becoming increasingly indistinct. Before long, they, too, were cut off, and for a short while, there wasn’t a sound. Only the faint sound of waves and the low motor noise of the equipment moving could be heard.

“Nao-san,”

Bou-san addressed quietly.

“Nao-san, are you there?”

Masako’s eyes remained closed, but her red lips moved.

“Yes... ”

Someone breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“You are Yoshimi Nao-san, right?”

“Yes… what is this?”

“I would like you to answer a few question.”

Bou-san said and began to ask various questions. Masako answered the questions while being confused. Everything matched well with the responses that I had heard in the main building. The sight of Masako continuing to talk with only her mouth moving felt quite abnormal given that she appeared completely asleep. Masako— Nao-san, who had borrowed Masako’s mouth, had asked several times, “What is this?” It left a strong impression.

“You died. ...do you understand?”

There was a pause following Bou-san’s words.

“...yes.”

“Do you know… how you died?”

There was another pause here.

“I fell… into the sea.”

As soon as she said this, something glistening came from Masako’s closed eyes.

“I was in the garden…watching the sea.”

Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Where in the garden was that?”

“It was on the other side… of the teahouse… I wanted to think about something... ”

“Did you slip?”

There was a long pause this time.

“...I was pushed off.”

As was expected. It was so after all.

“Who pushed you off?”

“I don’t know… someone pushed me from behind.”

She said that and took a long breath.

“I was so...frightened.”

...listening to her was heartbreaking. I lowered my head. How scared she must be. How sad she must be.

“Is there anything more? Don’t you remember something about the person who pushed you off?”

“...I don’t remember… but I’m glad I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Only the family go there. If it was someone from the family that pushed me… I don’t want to know.”

After she said so, she released another long sigh.

“I guess… I cannot live anymore.”

It was cruel. What did Nao-san supposedly do? Who held this grudge and did this terrible thing? ...who would make someone do this?

“Please rest in peace.”

When Bou-san said this, she cried out slightly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Someone… is pulling me.”

“Pulling?”

“What… is this? Who are you? I’m scared. I don’t want to go. Please stop pulling. That place is scary. I don’t like it… ”

“Nao-san?”

“I don’t like… such a place. I beg you, don’t pull me there. I don’t want to go to that place. Please, stop it…!”

All of us half-rose to our feet at her screaming voice.

“No…! Monster!”

“Nao-san!?”

“Help!”

Screaming along with her, Masako’s joined hands separated and fell atop her knees. Masako’s eyes immediately opened. Masako straightened her back, and then blinked as if dazzled.

“I… appear to have summoned her.”

“She was killed after all… ”

Ayako’s voice trembled.

“The question is, who is the culprit?”

John nodded.

“It’s not Yasutaka-san, at least. Since Nao-san was there, too, when he was taken to the hospital. And the grandmother doesn’t seem to be able to move about.”

“It also probably isn’t the children.”

Bou-san made a sour expression at Ayako’s words.

“That’s not necessarily true.”

“Why? After all, it would be impossible for the children.”

“If given momentum, it wouldn’t be impossible.”

“That’s true… but, if that’s the case for either of them, then certainly you would be suspicious of the others? There’s still someone in the house who’s possessed.”

“Why?”

“Why...”

Bou-san spoke over his shoulder to Ayako, who hesitated to speak.

“It may be someone who’s already been exorcised. The person may have forgotten what was done. If it was Youko-san...”

It was a frightening prospect. Youko-san had no memory of when she was possessed. During which, she may have pushed Nao-san off the cliff. Youko-san might have committed a serious crime while not knowing. If she found out, how shocked would she be…?

Thirteen family members. Akifumi-san and his grandmother, his father, his mother, his four siblings, his two sibling-in-laws, his nephew and two nieces. A total of thirteen people. With the exception of Nao-san, amongst the twelve people, there was the culprit who was supposed to have killed Nao-san.

The grandmother can't move. It's impossible for Yasutaka-san to be the culprit because he was hospitalized. If we were to trust Ayako's words, the three children and two sibling-in-laws, who had already been exorcised, were not the culprit. If I were to say by impression only, I don't think the culprit is Akifumi-san, his parents, or Teruka-san, who was previously attacked.

I can understand Nao-san's feelings when she said, 'I don't want to know.' I wouldn't want to know either. If we find out the name of the culprit, I wonder what we should do then. After the person is exorcised, what should be told to the person once they return to sanity?

I looked towards the window then.

What on earth happened to Nao-san's spirit?

Chapter 5 - Judas

1

I stood in the cave, vacantly watching the waves crash against the rocks at the entrance. Small orbs of light were also crashing along with the waves. It looked like snow.

...ah, I'm dreaming again...

A figure appeared among the waves. It was a woman. She was walking solemnly. With her head bowed and shoulders drooped.

"Nao-san..."

Nao-san, who had finally reached the cave, walked quietly as if she didn't notice me and exited towards the cove.

"Wait, Nao-san."

Upon exiting to the cove, Nao-san was taken in by the wind and blown up towards the sky.

I released a single sigh and looked back behind me. The small shrine was visible. It appeared distorted again. It gave off a very unpleasant atmosphere. I wondered if I should try to get nearer, however, I absolutely couldn't bring myself to do such a thing.

I vacantly watched the shrine for a while. And then, when my gaze returned to the sea, Nao-san once again entered my vision as she entered the cave from there.

"...Nao-san?"

She did not reply. When I rushed towards her, she unexpectedly flew away as if gently pushed by the wind. Without even shifting her gaze, she went out to the cove, then she was blown up towards the sky again. When I waited for a while, she emerged from the sea again. She repeated this over and over.

“...what?”

I wondered what was going on.

“What is she doing? Please tell me. —Naru! Why aren’t you here!?”

“Rebirth ritual.”

A voice suddenly came from behind. When I looked back, Naru was smiling.

...what!? If I call him, I’ll see him? I thought something like that.

“Rebirth ritual?”

“I think that’s probably so. Passing through a dark hole signifies being reborn once more. Although she’s passing through this cave over and over like that, I think she’s trying to change her nature into something different.”

...something different…

“This cave is summoning souls. A soul that’s summoned like that repeats the ritual. I understand it to that extent, but...”

“I’m a soul right now, aren’t I?”

Oh no, oh no, oh no! I don’t have to participate in that ritual, do I?

“That’s right. Therefore, it’s best not to get too close to here... let’s go.”

Naru held out his hand. I took his hand a little nervously. Unfortunately, I didn’t feel anything. Naturally, it was because I currently didn’t have a body. When he pulled my hand, we rode on a short breeze and soared to the top of the cove like surfacing from the water.

“Hey, Naru?”

‘Hmm?’ he asked as he gently directed his gaze toward me.

“Before, you told me you showed me the direction of the dream, right? Was it also like that all the way until now?”

There was no reply to this. He simply smiled softly.

Wispy lights floated up from the cove one after another.

“Mai...”

“What?”

I looked back when I was called, but there wasn’t anyone there.

“Naru?”

“—Mai.”

Where... where is that voice coming from?

“Mai!”

***

Y-y-y-yes!

I was suddenly awake. Before my eyes was Masako’s appalled expression.

“Ah...”

When I hurriedly looked around, I was in the base. I was leaning against the wall and seemed to have dozed off. I couldn’t see anyone other than Masako. The morning light was shining in through the window.

“S-sorry. Did you call me?”

Masako stared coldly.

“It seems it would have been better not to have called.”

“Not particularly... ”

“You were probably on a date with someone, right?”

W-w-w-what is this unexpectedly?

Masako smiled maliciously,

“You seem to have mistaken me for someone else... or something.”

Oh no!

“That— that’s not true! I didn’t make that mistake, it honestly isn’t like that, it wasn’t that kind of mistake, err...”

I was dripping cold sweat.

Masako pouted a little, then looked into my face.

“Were there any clues?”

I recalled the dream and my mood fell abruptly.

“...Nao-san was passing through the cave over and over again.”

Masako looked at me doubtfully.

“Through the cave?”

“Yeah. She went through to the cove from the sea over and over. Was it… rebirth ritual?”

“Yes, that is where someone passes through a dark hole. Tainai-meguri.”

“Tainai-meguri?”

“That kind of place is common to shrines and temples. There is a dark tunnel and it is likened to the belly of a mother. Upon exiting the tunnel and going out, one is born anew.”

Really?

“However, why is Nao-san doing such a thing? ...I wonder if it is the process of transmigration of the soul.”

“Transmigration of the soul, is that reincarnation?”

“Yes... I do not understand it well.”

...yeah.

“Where is everyone?”

“At the entrance... —They have returned.”

When Masako indicated the entrance of the room, lively voices from the direction of the corridor grew closer. The lattice door opened and everyone returned. Though, I noticed the number of people was one greater.

“...Yasuhara-san!”

When I raised my voice, Yasuhara-san (Yasuhara Osamu. Originally a client.), who was surrounded by everyone, directed a smile towards me. Yasuhara-san’s personality seemed just like his expression appeared.

“Ah, Taniyama-san, hello.”

I felt somewhat relieved. Seeing his bright smile during such a painful mood was delightful.

“As I thought, you were who Bou-san called.”

“That’s right, it was me.”

“You got here just now? Was it difficult?”

Yasuhara-san gave a brisk nod.

“It was really difficult. Even I’m fascinated by my finesse.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I was in Okinawa.”

Eeeep!

“You arrived quickly, didn’t you?”

Today, right on the heels of yesterday. Fairly early this morning.

“Right? After I hung up the phone, I immediately packed my bags and went to the airport. Because of my critically ill friend.”

“Critically ill friend?”

“Indeed. I wasn’t just enjoying myself, I was in the middle of my part-time job as a bellboy at a resort hotel. I said my friend named Takigawa was critically ill because of an accident. Saying so, I was able to escape.”

Bou-san smiled wryly.

“Who’s critically ill? Not me!”

“Now, now. Because of that, one way or another, I caught a flight up to Fukuoka. I got on the last bullet train and went to Osaka. From there, I further hopped on the night train. Then, I arrived this morning.”

“Remarkable.”

I clapped my hands.

“Right?”

Laughing, Yasuhara-san looked at Bou-san.

“Well? What should I do?”

“We can’t move from here. Shōnen, I want you to gather information outside.”

“Oh, I see. I should be a detective. But, what kind of information should I gather?”

“I’ll describe the details right now… ”

Bou-san said, then questioned Yasuhara-san.

“Which reminds me, Shōnen. About what year was the Ansei era?”

“The Ansei Purge was the year 1858. Wasn’t it thereabout?”

Remarkable. Truly.

“Well, that kind of information.”

“Got it.”

2

Yasuhara-san left without even taking time to drink tea, and those of us left behind checked last night's data. As soon as it began playing, all of us couldn't help frowning.

"What... is this sound?"

A low sound came from every camera. It was almost as if the sea was roaring. Slowly, it repeatedly increased and decreased. It somehow sounded like the breathing of a large beast.

"It's like the breathing of a sleeping dinosaur..."

That strange description came from John.

"Exactly."

We listened to that eerie sound for a while.

***

It was after it had become late in the afternoon of that day. We, who had been idling in the base, stood up at the shrill sound of bells.

"...what is that!?"

"Isn't it the fire alarm?"

When we went out into the corridor, there was a faint smoke drifting from the direction of the main building. As we ran, smoke could be seen through the window rising from the back of the main building.

"...isn't that the grandmother's room!?"

"It looks like it."

As we ran up, flames were rising from the back of the corridor that led to the tatami mat room where the grandmother was.

“Takigawa-san!”

Akifumi-san, who was putting out the fire with a blanket, raised his voice.

“Are you okay!? What about your grandmother!?”

“My father just went in from the window.”

“What about the little kids?”

“They were already taken outside.”

Hiroe-obasan rushed over carrying a fire extinguisher. I took it.

“Are there more!?”

“Yes. We’re collecting them now.”

Hiroe-obasan said, then ran away. John held out his hands, so I passed him the fire extinguisher. I was about to follow Hiroe-obasan. It was at that time. Lin-san suddenly looked back behind him.

“...Naru.”

“Eh!?”

Lin-san pivoted and rushed off.

“Please look after things here!”

Look after… I reflexively started running, too.

“Mai!?”

“Ayako, collect the fire extinguishers with Masako!”

I shouted to Ayako, who was dumbfounded, and ran after Lin-san.

...everyone, I’m sorry!

***

Lin-san rushed into the base. I bound into the base right after him.

“Ah...!?”

In the base was Lin-san and another person… Kazuyasu-san was there.

While peering in Lin-san’s direction, Kazuyasu-san tore up the sliding door that

lead to the next room with the kitchen knife he gripped. He raised one hand and shook the sliding door, however, it would not open. Growing irritated, he stabbed the paper with the point of the knife. The tightly closed door was in shreds because of that.

“Kazuyasu-san...”

“This means there is someone who is still possessed.”

Lin-san said as he looked at Kazuyasu-san.

“Stop that. If you open that, you are going to die.”

Kazuyasu-san roared. He heavily drew back his kitchen knife and stabbed it. A deep gash was made on the sliding door.

“Taniyama-san, will you try attacking with the nine syllables?”

“What... !?”

I was told I shouldn’t use it on people.

“If I do it, he will be seriously injured.”

“But!”

“That barrier will not hold much longer. If Naru is awoken, it will be the end.”

But... Suddenly, an image of the burns on the backs of Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan appeared in my mind. Hurting people is a dreadful thing.

Kazuyasu-san stabbed the knife again. A long hole opened in the sliding door. The white profile of Naru, who was lying down, was visible through the tear. I raised my hand to ward off Kazuyasu-san, but my hand would not move. I was still hesitating…

Lin-san whistled with his fingers. Kazuyasu-san again pierced the point of the blade into the hole in the sliding door. The hole expanded— The thing I saw then made me stiffen. From out of the hole came— a red arm. It was an arm of about the length of a child’s and it seemed somewhat twisted. The skin looked like tanned leather, and yet, it was red as if wet with blood. The fingers were gnarled like knots, and the nails were as long as fingers...

It moved with a speed that sliced the air, then disappeared into the hole. A

moment later, blood went flying and splattered the surface of the sliding door. Kazuyasu-san dropped the kitchen knife. Four deep, narrow wounds were carved into his arm as if gouged out— Despite me being stunned, Lin-san moved without hesitation. Before I knew it, he had approached Kazuyasu-san, who was crouched and holding his arm, which was stained crimson with gushing blood. Again, blood flew. The spray painted speckles over the sliding door. This time, it was Lin-san who was bleeding.

“Lin-san!”

Lin-san thrust his arm, which was deeply cut, toward Kazuyasu-san. However, Kazuyasu-san quickly drew back. He sprang back like a cat. The movement didn’t seem human.

“Rin...”

I raised my hand.

“Pyō... Tō, Sha,”

This... terrible fight cannot be allowed!

“Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zai, Zen!”

Kazuyasu-san howled. He flopped on top of the tatami mat, tumbling, then immediately got up and charged towards me. He hurled himself from right in front of me and I involuntarily screamed. He hit me and my back heavily collided with a post. For an instant, I stopped breathing, but I immediately shook my head with vigor.

...what happened to Kazuyasu-san!?

He wasn’t in the room. The figure of Lin-san could be seen rushing out of the base. Though my feet got tangled, I chased after him. When I went out into the corridor, Kazuyasu-san had just broken through a window that was at the end of the corridor and flew outside.

“Taniyama-san, please call Takigawa-san! Send someone to the base!”

“Alright!”

3

Just as I ran toward the main building, I was immediately met by Bou-san and the others as they were returning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kazuyasu-san... ”

What should I say?

“He attacked the base and fought with Lin-san… he escaped to the garden. I was told to get you, Bou-san.”

“—John, come on!”

“Alright!”

They ran off. Akifumi-san followed them. I stopped Ayako, who tried to follow thereafter.

“Go to the base! So it’s not attacked again!”

“What about you, Mai?”

“I’m going after them.”

My feet already started running.

“Wait—! Don’t go! Even if you go!”

“I’m weak, so there’s something only I can do!”

***

I rushed into the garden and looked around the surrounding area. Where did Lin-san and Kazuyasu-san go!? The others, who were a little in front of me, were also looking around. Suddenly, I heard the sound of a whistle from the direction of the cape.

“Bou-san, over there!”

We ran. We ran through the large garden, and when we went around the teahouse, Lin-san’s figure became visible.

“Lin-san!”

Lin-san, who cast a glance in this direction, had a growing number of cuts. Kazuyasu-san could be seen hiding behind the shrubbery.

“Takigawa-san, watch yourself. He can use whirlwind sickles.”

“...damn.”

Kazuyasu-san growled in the back of his throat like a cornered beast. Lin-san and Bou-san slowly closed in on him. Out of breath and dizzy, I placed my hand against the hedgerow. I felt nauseous with tension and fatigue— “Mai-san, are you alr...”

I didn’t hear the end of John’s words.

Suddenly, the scene lurched violently. It was distorted and twisted, and just as I clung to the hedgerow, I was pushed forcefully from behind.

—I’m falling!

My body became rigid. The scene was shaking and the surface of the water at the bottom of the cliff suddenly appeared in my field of view. The rocky stretch was washed by the waves and the waves bubbled pure white… I was going to crash. I could not live if I slammed into that.

Immediately, my field of view changed. The edge of the cliff was visible at my feet and then time stopped there. I was thrown into the air. The hedgerow was visible by the edge of the cliff, which I was slipping away from. Then, the figure of a person was there. As I grasped at edge of the hedgerow, the apathetic face that watched me fall away was…

“Mai-san!?”

John called me and brought me back to myself.

I didn’t fall. My hand was grasping the hedgerow as it should be. My feet were properly situated.... my knees collapsed and I sat down on the spot.

“Taniyama-san.”

Tears spilled in large drops.

“...Kazuyasu-san, you did it, didn’t you?”

Kazuyasu-san showed his face from among the shrubbery. He looked in my direction.

“You pushed Nao-san from here.”

Images surfaced in my mind. In an evening room, a birdcage was there and Kazuyasu-san thrusted his hand inside the cage. There were cries like the high-pitched scream of birds…

“It was you who killed the birds and dogs, too.”

In the garden. He was coming out of the garage. Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan were watching him…

“You also tampered with the car... why are you doing all of this?”

My tears would not stop. Kazuyasu-san did those things, and yet he didn’t.

Bou-san quickly formed the sword seal.

“...who are you?”

Only a growl was heard from the shrubbery.

“What grudge do you bear to do something like this?”

A spray of blood went up like a burst of mist. A red wound appeared on Bou-san’s arm.

“Tell me who!”

A low laughter resounded from the shrubbery.

“Why do you want to release Naru?”

There was no reply. Only a chuckle reverberated from the shrubbery.

“What’s your purpose?”

Finally, a low voice replied.

“Death.”

Suddenly, he sprung out from the shrubbery where he was hiding and ran low through the garden. He was much faster than my eyes could follow. When my eyes caught up with the direction Kazuyasu-san had run, his figure was nowhere.

When I pushed down the hedgerow, there was only an expanse of sky fully bathed in light.

By the time I reached the hedgerow on the cove side, there was a figure floating in the pure white foam that stretched over the surface of the cove water. Akifumi-san stopped Bou-san who tried to rush off in order to bring him back to his senses.

“It’s already... too late.”

“But...”

After he said that, Bou-san exhaled and looked down.

The neck of that person, who floated face down in the foam, was bent at a very unusual angle. If anyone were to look, they would know that it was already too late.

“Like this...”

People died even before this case. But, it wasn’t in front of my eyes.

“Not like this!”

Tears rapidly flooded my eyes and it was impossible to open them.

“What did we come here for!? We can’t do anything at all!!”

A painful sorrow filled my chest and it was impossible to even breathe or swallow. With this bitter thing caught in my throat, I thought I would surely suffocate. Someone stroked my back. A warm arm went around my shoulders.

“...it was nobody’s fault.”

It was Akifumi-san’s voice.

“It wasn’t Taniyama-san or Takigawa-san’s fault. It was nobody’s fault.”

I could not answer. I also couldn’t open my eyes. My head was down and I rubbed my forehead against the top of Akifumi-san’s shouldered.

“I know that you did everything you could.”

Still, it doesn’t make sense that people should have to die.

“I think I’m okay with this.”

...how...

When I raised my face, Akifumi-san was crying.

“Because at least my brother… lived without knowing what he had done.”

...what he had done. That he pushed his little sister and let her die…

I nodded. Even so, I couldn’t stop crying.

4

Yasuhara-san returned at night to hear the story of Kazuyasu-san. He sighed once.

“Keep up your strength. Because it’s not finished yet.”

...yeah.

“After suffering such casualties, if you leave defeated, then what was it that you come here for?”

Yasuhara-san said, then threw down an extraordinary amount of copied documents on top of the table.

“And now, shall I finish my homework?”

“Homework?”

“Yes. First, this is the newspaper Takigawa-san requested.”

One-by-one, Yasuhara-san showed us bound copies of documents.

“This is from the time of the predecessor, and this is from the time of the predecessor before the last.”

“Well done.”

Yasuhara-san gave Bou-san the copies.

“To summarize, it’s like this. The predecessor— that is, during the time Akifumi-san’s grandfather was ceded the house from his great-grandfather, eight people died. I understand from consulting the newspaper that four people committed double suicide. Of the remaining four people, one was a suicide, one was an accident, and the other two abruptly died from unknown causes.”

“Double suicide...?”

“Yes. The second son died after killing his wife and two children. I would call

that forced double suicide. Two customers died, but those didn't have clear causes. Since the bodies came out of the water on the coast, it was tentatively considered an accident, but I think it's suspicious. Three spiritualists died. Two of them burned themselves to death when their clothes caught fire from the flame of a Goma ritual. The remaining one was an unexplained sudden death. It was thirteen people in total."

"Thirteen people, huh?"

"Before that, during the time of the great-grandfather, only six family members are listed in the newspaper. However, since it was before the war, I think it was really suspicious that it was six people. Those six people who died, died due to poison that was inside the well. This was immediately after they moved here and closed the shop in Kanazawa."

"Well, why was that? Did the great-great-grandfather die after moving over here?"

"It seems so. Since his age at death was seventy-eight, it was a very advanced age. I think he had already ceded the shop to his son. —Next, here's the family death register."

"Oh, you were able to copy it?"

"Yes. I went to the temple first thing in the morning and made a copy. After that I visited the city library, then immediately went to Kanazawa...."

"You went all the way to Kanazawa!?"

"I certainly went. In fact, I ran and ran. It was on the train, while looking over a bunch of copies, that I noticed something strange."

"Something strange?"

"Yes. It was the grandmother who said, 'Accidents occur whenever there is a change of ownership,' but actually, the large number of deaths that occurred in this Yoshimi house were only during the last two generations of predecessors."

"Let me see!"

Bou-san snatched the copy of the family death register.

"That doesn't mean the deaths during the previous generation weren't

particularly unusual.”

“That’s for sure...”

“I thought this seemed strange, so on the way back I visited the temple again and looked at all the family death registers for both the main household and the branch household. This is that copy.”

Yasuhara-san presented the copy.

“In conclusion, the problem isn’t with the Yoshimi house, but with this location.”

“...what?”

“Akifumi-san’s family— what’s known as the branch household from Kanazawa — have only come to suffer misfortune since moving here. Before that time, the family that lived here were descendants of the main household, however, the family died out about five years before the branch household from Kanazawa came back.”

“Huh...”

“In addition to that, the first death happened in third year of the Ansei era after the main household came over here. Before that, there wasn’t a Yoshimi house in this area. But, if one were to speak of who had ownership before that, then it would certainly be the family of the Fujisako house. However, the Fujisako house died out in the first year of the Ansei era.”

Saying this, Yasuhara-san then pulled out a different copy with triumph.

“After persuading the chief priest, I was able to make a copy of the family death register of the Fujisako house.”

“Remarkable.”

“Right? The Fujisako’s control only lasted two generations, but there’s nothing prior to that in their family death register. In other words, in summary up to this point,”

Yasuhara-san said, then lightly cleared his throat.

“This location was originally owned by the Fujisako house. The Yoshimi house

came after they died out due to accidents. This Yoshimi house lived here for four generations, but they also died out in the fourth generation. It turns out, the family from the branch household came thereafter.”

Bou-san ruffled his hair.

“So, the problem isn’t the family, but the location...?”

“It seems so. Next, I tried investigating the history and legends around here. The result was this,”

The bundle of copies Yasuhara-san stacked was easily two books worth.

“How did you investigate this much stuff in one day…? While taking a roundtrip all the way to Kanazawa?”

Yasuhara-san smiled at the sound of Bou-san’s amazed voice.

“Hehehe. I have a talent for this.”

“A talent... you say?”

“After going to the temple and asking to copy the family death register, I went to the city library, but I did something before browsing newspapers. Can you guess what it was?”

“...what was it?”

“I stopped bored-looking schoolgirls and offered them part-time jobs.”

Bou-san, who was resting his chin in his hand, lost balance and dropped his chin.

“You hired part-time workers?”

“Quite so. If I wanted to hurry, only human wave tactics would work, right? ”

...good point.

“I was able to secure a one person workforce in Kanazawa, too. By I keeping in touch with the kid I left over there by phone, I was able to collect this much material.”

...in—incredible.

Yasuhara-san, who was puffed up with pride, smiled and looked at Lin-san.

“As such, ‘Shibuya Psychic Research’ will accept the part-time work fees, right?”

Lin-san gave an exceptionally wry smile.

“We’ll pay.”

“Phew, that’s a relief.”

His relief was oddly amusing.

5

“Well, after that, while continuing the investigation, I came by a bit of an interesting story related to this location.”

“Interesting story?”

“Yes. It’s a common folktale about ijin killing.”

“Ijin? ...killing?”

What is that?

When I spoke, Yasuhara-san laughed.

“Actually, it’s not ijin as in a remarkable person. Rather, of ‘Red Shoes.’ It says, ‘taken away by an ijin-san.’ You don’t know it?”

“Ah, a foreigner.”

In other words, John.

“Yes. But ‘ijin’ in ‘ijin killing’ is a little different. If anything, I would say it means something like ‘outsider’.”

Huh?

“In the olden days, a village was a closed society. Nobody left and nobody came in. The villagers were deeply linked in some way by blood as well as by a regional bond. In other words, your relatives were your neighbors.”

“Mm.”

“However, a peddler traveling around various countries might perhaps arrive there. He’s in no way connected to the villagers by blood or by region. He is someone completely different from the villagers. In other words, he’s an ‘ijin’.”

“Oh, I see. Speaking in a broad sense, an ‘ijin’ is also an outlander.”

“That’s right. As such, there are old stories left behind as folktales about ‘ijin’

that came into the village being killed. This is what is classified as ‘ijin killing’.”

“Wow.”

“Nevertheless, even in the case of folktales branded as ‘ijin killing’, it was a narrow range of ‘ijin’. Among the medicine sellers, peddlers, and various others, the ones that were normally killed were the so-called ‘Marebito’.”

I looked at Yasuhara-san reproachfully.

“Again in this way, you’re confusing me with words I don’t know.”

“Sorry about that. That is to say, a man named Orikuchi Shinobu, for some reason or another, used the term ‘Marebito’ when speaking of ‘Raihoushin’ to represent divine beings who wandered from village to village.”

...ah...I don’t understand.

“Raihoushin is a deity who visits. They come from somewhere to do things like bless villagers and give warnings. To expand on this, any agent of a deity who comes from somewhere to do things like bless villagers and give warnings is called a ‘Marebito’.”

“What is what?”

“These are people who, using supernatural powers, are able to communicate well with beings like Gods, Buddhas, Spirits, etc., unlike common folk who are unable to form such connections. They would come to villages and perform things common folk could not such as exterminating monsters and exorcising vengeful spirits.”

Hmm, that means…. “Oh, then, we would be ‘Marebito’, too? We’re outsiders from Tokyo and we exterminate evil spirits, right?”

Yasuhara-san clapped his hands.

“Yes. That’s right. ‘Marebito’ would be people such as monks and priestesses who wander here and there.”

“If that’s the case, you should have said so from the beginning.”

“Now, now. Killings of such ‘Marebito’ is a pattern present in old Japanese tales. It was called ‘ijin killing’ in folktales.”

“Mm.”

“The story approximately says that ‘Marebito’ who came to villages were murdered for reasons like being despised and possessing riches, and as a result a curse would arise. ‘Marebito’ were the target of scorn while at the same time being objects of fear. Consequently, their existence was despised and they were murdered for trivial reasons, but at the same time, their existence was feared because after they were killed, a curse would arise. Leaving aside there actually being a curse, it was impossible to kill a ‘Marebito’ and get away without consequences which meant they remained an image of fear and became a kind of legend.”

“That makes sense. Even we’re looked down on or admired for no reason.”

Yasuhara-san nodded.

“Right? —Because of that, ‘ijin killing’ remained here, but,”

Saying so, he opened a notebook.

“This has two patterns. I don’t really know which one is true, or whether both are, or whether neither are. But anyway, type A,”

Yasuhara-san read the notebook.

“Long ago, three Shugendō practitioners came to the village. They saw ‘Okobu-sama’ and said they would attempt to exorcise it because a curse had been placed on it. When they exorcised it, ‘Okobu-sama’ suddenly transformed into a golden Buddha statue. They said since the benevolent Buddha statue had been washed by the waves and ended up in that form, it must have been cursed. The ascetics built a movable shrine to the Buddha statue in the city and enshrined it there. However, the village elder saw it and, due to desire for the golden Buddha statue, took the ascetics to the coast and murdered them, but at the same instant the ascetics were killed, the golden Buddha statue turned back into the original stick of wood. Soon after, the elder’s household was plagued by a series of misfortunes and died out. Because of this, it was said to be the ascetics’ curse. —This is type A.”

I see, I see.

“The other type. Long ago, three troupe leaders came to the village. They saw

‘Okobu-sama’ and said because it was a benevolent god, a shrine should be built and it should be enshrined there. However, the villagers were having trouble paying the land tax due to a poor harvest that year, and there was no such allowance. Furthermore, a villager saw that the troupe leaders had a lot of money and communicated that. The villages gathered and agreed that they would kill the troupe leaders, then called them to the elder’s house. Poison was mixed in the meal, killing the troupe leaders, and after taking their money, the corpses were discarded into the sea. Since storms and high waves followed from then on, the villagers became remorseful and built a shrine to worship ‘Okobu-sama’ and mounds for the troupe leaders. —This is type B.”

“How awful...”

“Well, such a thing is known as ‘ijin killing’.”

After saying so, Yasuhara-san leaned forward.

“I don’t think they’re merely legends. There are a lot of facts shared about the three ‘Marebito’ and the ‘Okobu-sama’, right? Summarizing the two, it would be as such. Three ‘Marebito’ came to the village and said something about ‘Okobu-sama’. However, in the end, these ‘Marebito’ were killed by the greedy villagers. The crime was related to the ‘elder’ and, the location where they died or where their corpses were discarded, was the sea. As a result, bad things occurred in the village. The outline of both stories are ultimately the same.”

Bou-san blinked with surprise.

“Then, what? You think there was actually that kind of incident in the past?”

“I think so. I think there was an actual incident that acts as the model, and while it was being handed down, it split into two types.”

“Hm...”

“So, when I actually researched the local history, I found this. It’s a legend entitled, ‘Regarding Okobutsu-sama.’”

“Okobutsu-sama? Not Okobu-sama?”

“Right. Nevertheless, it’s a story similar to type A. Somewhere along the coast a stick of wood was washed ashore, and when it was shown to a monk, he said it

was a benevolent Buddha-sama. In fact, when the monk chanted a sutra, the stick of wood immediately transformed into a golden Buddha statue. However, the following morning it had again transformed into the stick of wood. The story says from then on it was called ‘Okobutsu-sama’ and enshrined.”

“I see, it’s definitely similar. Then, type A is more of a true story?”

“I think it’s dangerous to make such an immediate decision. Still, I believe the underlying story is true.”

Bou-san nodded and contemplated for a moment.

“Three ascetics… or troupe leaders... ”

“What is it?”

“There were mounds at the shrine.”

“Oh, the ‘Tohachi mounds’?”

“Did you know why they’re named that?”

“No. There were no clues about that. I’ll go investigate it further tomorrow, but... ”

“There were three mounds, right? They’re also known as the ‘Sanroku mounds’. Maybe it’s ‘Three Roku mounds’.”

“—Ah, I see. Perhaps. But, what are ‘Roku mounds’?”

“Maybe ‘Rokubu mounds’?”

Yasuhara clapped his hands and nodded emphatically.

“Oh, yeah! Maybe ‘Three Rokubu mounds’ was abbreviated to ‘Sanroku mounds’? Then the last part of type B fits perfectly. It says they, ‘built a shrine and built mounds.’”

I asked Bou-san,

“What’s Rokubu?”

“They were pilgrimaging monks who visited six-sixty sacred sites all over the country. They were referred to as ‘Rokujuurokubu (66 copies)’, which was shortened to ‘Rokubu’, from the fact that they delivered hand-copied scriptures

from the Lotus Sutra one copy at a time. It also came to refer to pilgrimaging monks who wandered various countries. In other words, ‘Marebito’.”

“Really?”

At the same time I raised my voice, Yasuhara-san began to furiously turn over a bunch of copies.

“...What’s wrong?”

“‘Rokubu mounds’. Somewhere… here!”

Yasuhara-san pulled out a binding of documents.

“There was a legend around here about ‘Rokubu mounds’, but I overlooked it because there were no ‘Rokubu mounds’. Let me see…”

He flipped through the documents and read.

“When it happened isn’t written, but long ago a famine happened around here and the discontented villagers caused a riot. However, they were subdued in the end. At that time, the villagers were told their lives would be spared if they turned in the ringleaders and the villagers handed over the ringleaders. The ringleaders ran away, but their pursuers caught them just after they fled to the ‘Rokubu mounds’. They were beheaded on the spot. Because odd events took place in the village after that such as the outbreak of an epidemic and strange rumblings in the earth, there was purported to be a curse from the ringleaders. Graves were built for them near the ‘Rokubu mounds’, but it didn’t stop in the least. Eventually, a temple was built there and when the graves were generously worshipped, the strangeness finally subsided.”

Suddenly, a voice sounded in my head.

(—This... betrayal.)

“Next to the ‘Rokubu mounds’? That’s here, isn’t it?”

Ayako asked. Bou-san nodded,

“To the left of the shrine is the sea, and the mountain is on the opposite side of the road, but I wouldn’t say across the road is next to.”

“There’s more. Long ago, there was a riot that occurred in this area, and the

ringleaders were beheaded near the ‘Rokubu mounds’. Graves were built nearby and they were carefully buried, but if anyone disturbs the graves, he’ll develop a strange rash on the neck. Soon after it will rot and his head will fall off.”

Ayako and John spoke in unison.

“A strange rash on the neck!”

Yasuhara-san flipped through the documents with a speed and fury.

“According to the local history— an uprising occurred only once in this area. The riot in this area occurred in the second year of the Bunkyū era, that is, the year 1862. And the five ringleaders were decapitated.”

“Five... ringleaders!?”

(Who was there? Me, Naru, Bou-san, Ayako, and Lin-san... five.)

“Wait a minute. The riot related to the ‘Rokubu mounds’ and the riot in the second year of the Bunkyū era are probably the same one, right? There were five ringleaders of the riot. Then, the graves built next to the shrine—”

After Ayako said this, John and Bou-san looked at each other.

“The stones in the garden!”

(—always be cursed until the end of days!)

That’s... what this meant...

6

“Well, should we go then?”

“Bou-san?”

“The five people from the riot and the three Rokubu. Which one do you think is the culprit in this case?”

Bou-san looked around at us. We were bewildered and looked around at each other.

Yasuhara-san spoke,

“There are too few clues to choose one of them.”

When he said that, Bou-san lightly sighed.

“If that’s the case, —John. Let’s split up between the five and three.”

“Alright.”

“Lin-san, what are you going to do?”

When Bou-san asked, Lin-san responded,

“I cannot go. Since one of my shiki was knocked away in today’s uproar, I cannot leave here.”

“Knocked away?”

When I asked, he replied,

“Yes. It’s presence hasn’t disappeared, so it should return in a little while, but in the meantime, if I don’t stay here, Naru will be vulnerable. —May I suggest something?”

“What?”

“I think it’s better not to disperse your powers. I think there will be heavy resistance.”

Bou-san raised his eyebrows. He looked at the bandage that was wound around his arm with displeasure.

“...good grief. —Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.”

Bou-san raised his finger. He pointed towards the cape.

“We’ll clear away the most numerous ones. Since it’s five. We’ll try an exorcism.”

It was as he said this. Suddenly, an impact like a side blow ran through the house.

***

“What is that!?”

Soon after I raised my voice, heavy footsteps were heard running through the corridor.

“Takigawa-san, the temperature is decreasing.”

When I looked back toward Lin-san’s voice, the video of the six thermography instruments had turned blue as if they had been dyed. On the screen where only number data is displayed, the numbers were rapidly changing. While watching, the word ‘ERROR’ was increasing all over, and just like that, the word ‘ERROR’ filled every screen.

“Unit three has stopped.”

The video on camera three was interrupted. Following that, the monitor screens went out one after another.

“Bastards...”

To Bou-san’s words, Yasuhara said,

“I guess they made the first move.”

“I thought we’d go visit, but they left from over there.”

“Isn’t that our gain?”

“If it’s a beautiful lady.”

“Is that so? If it’s an ugly woman, then it’s just an annoyance?”

“That particular sort is persistent.”

“I see. Experienced words carry weight.”

...when Bou-san and Yasuhara-san unite, there isn’t even any tension.

The sound of heavy steps continued in the corridor. Overlapping that, a low sound became audible. What John described as, “the breathing of a sleeping dinosaur.” The low sound gradually grew stronger as if creeping and it became clear that it was the voices of people. Low, low voices like the singing of people.

“Huh? Aren’t those the words of a sutra?”

“If the opponent is the Rokubu, it would be just like them to do that. Are those three the culprits?”

“The one’s applying pressure are the monks? I guess it’s not too appreciated.”

“At the very least, if they were nuns.”

...how long are they going to keep up this imprudent comic dialogue?

“Shōnen, stay here. Lin, I'm counting on you.”

“Alright.”

“Mai, Masako, Ayako. We’re going to have a look at the situation. Stay here until then.”

“Oh, I’m going!”

In reply to Ayako’s strong voice,

“If you recklessly leave, you’ll be hit by whirlwind sickles, and it’s very painful.”

“I understand the danger!”

“When you become damaged goods with that personality, offers of marriage will disappear. —Which brings me to John. Let’s be good friends and draw the short straw.”

“Alright.”

Bou-san and John went running out of the base. I stopped Ayako, who was going to follow them.

“He told us to wait.”

“Even so, I can’t comply!”

“Even if we go, we’ll just get in the way! At the very least, let’s see what happens.”

“Don’t combine me with you! I’m a professional!”

Being yelled at, I got offended.

“Considering that, you haven’t been useful, have you?”

“It couldn’t be helped. Because of the conditions in this place, I’m able to help here.”

...she’s able to help...here?

When I tried to ask in return, the lights suddenly went out.

“What happened?”

“It seems like a power line is out or the breaker tripped.”

It was Lin-san’s calm voice. Due to the moonlight coming in through the window, my eyes immediately became accustomed to the darkness.

“At any rate, I’m going.”

“Wait, Ayako!”

Just then, Masako raised her voice.

“...over there!”

Masako was pointing at the window. From the eaves above the window, something elongated was hanging. It appeared to be a human arm. Only one arm was hanging down.

While watching it, the hand scratched at the air. It was wriggling as if struggling, then another arm came hanging down. Both arms grabbed the eaves. Then, an upside down human face looked in from the edge of the eaves.

It was the face of a man. The man looked inside the room, then very slowly leaned forward. Remaining upside down, he stretched both his hands out towards the window and pounded on the glass. Right after, the man crawled out from the eaves without even falling. As if he was a gecko or something, he

crawled on the glass and revealed his whole body.

The man crawled out to the center of the glass. Another hand immediately appeared from the eaves. Then a woman appeared. From the sides and bottom of the window, hands could be seen sticking to the glass.

I had unconsciously backed up to the opposite wall. Men, women, children… The window was rapidly filling with people who had crawled out upside down from the roof and were clinging to the glass. All of whom peered inside expressionlessly.

One struck the glass with a bang. Another one imitated that. Before long, all of them had started to pound on the glass. The movement was mechanical without expression.

“Yasuhara-san, come here.”

Masako prompted Yasuhara-san. She made him sit against the wall and sat herself beside him, then she clasped her hands together. With her eyes closed, she moved only her mouth and began chanting something.

They started to pound the glass in a uniform rhythm. The glass began to steadily tremble. Each time a fist connected, the glass visibly rippled… it was cracking. It would break soon.

Lin-san whistled with his fingers. At the same time, Ayako cut the nine syllables. In a hair’s breadth, the glass was shattered inward. Figures were scattered outside the window and others came leaping inside.

“Mai, there’s no need to hold back because they’re spirits of the dead!”

“Okay!”

I answered and poised both hands— then I screamed.

From the window frame that had broken glass, a woman was trying to crawl inside. Her body was full of wounds and half of her face was smashed and caving in.

However, I knew it was Nao-san.

***

—Why? Why is Nao-san..?

“Mai! Stop idling!”

I nodded, then readied my hand even though I felt discouraged. I mean, that was Nao-san, right…?

A little girl crawled towards the adjacent room.

“Rin, Pyō, Tō, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zen, Gyō”

That peculiar nine syllables came from Lin-san. As if repulsed, the child went tumbling out the window. It’s expressionless face momentarily showed pain, and because of that I became increasingly paralyzed.

We were not the target of the that crowd coming in from the window one after another. It was the adjacent room. Did they want to release Naru from there or the being possessing him...? Even if they were knocked outside the window, they came crawling up again. It was futile against their persistence and insatiably.

When I bolstered my courage and raised my hand, a sharp pain shot through my wrist. I was surprised and when I looked, there was a thin cut. Then, blood began to trickle.

Ayako screamed. Red spread over the shoulder of her white shirt. Lin-san was covered in thin cuts, too.

There’s no way we can compete… with this…

Something suddenly grazed across the side of my face. There was a dull sound and it stuck in the floor by the window.

“On kirikiri bazara bajiri hora manda manda un hatta!”

I momentarily looked between the ritual instrument that rose up from the floor and the figure that had leaped into the room.

“On sara sara bazara hara kyara un hatta, on amirito dohanba un hatta,”

Suddenly, the swarm of dead tumbled out the window.

“On biso hora daraki shabazara hanjara un hatta, on asan magini un hatta, on shaugyarei makasan maen sowaka!”

Bou-san, who was also covered in cuts, ran up to his Tokkosho and pierced it over again.

“Try to enter if I put this here!”

A man appeared from below the window. He extended his hand, trying to enter the room, then vanished below the window as if repulsed by something. Although they approached the window one after another, something there seemed to cause intense pain and they were unable to enter.

I slumped and sat down. My tension dissolved, then I suddenly broke into a cold sweat.

“Where’s Brown-san?”

After being asked by Lin-san, Bou-san replied, “He’s leading the young master and the others. They’ll be here soon.”

“Did something show up over there?”

After Ayako asked,

“Those things showed up! We were surrounded by a band of drowned corpses. I’m telling you, it’s like a zombie movie.”

Just as Bou-san said this with a bitter expression, a scream was heard from the direction of the corridor.

When we ran into the corridor, screams could be heard from the direction of the main building. Following after Bou-san, who broke into a run, Ayako also broke into a run. I was in doubt, looking between the inside of the room and the pitch-dark corridor. Masako nodded.

“Be careful.”

I nodded, then followed after Ayako.

***

The screaming was taking place in the corridor a little past the entrance. Akifumi-san and the others could be seen crouched in the corridor. Katsuki-kun or Wakako-chan, or one of the children was crying. And something faintly white was flying pest-like about the area. John, who stood nearby, was sprinkling holy

water and driving them off.

John shouted.

“Please don’t touch this! You’ll have a hard time.”

...hard time?

Just as I stared back at him, a white thing changed its angle and flew towards me.

“Un hatta”

It disappeared as if dissolved by Bou-san’s voice.

“John! Hurry over here! It’s safe if you go to the base!”

Nodding, John spoke to the others around him. Akifumi-san, who was holding Katsuki-kun, was the first to rise, then everyone stood up and ran towards the base.

Despite John saying, ‘Don’t touch,’ there was no way to avoid them. While I staggered without regard to hitting them, I ran towards the base. Being careless and running without thinking, a white thing hit my stomach as I started to approach the base.

I felt an impact. The impact, which pierced by stomach, was from something hard. I fell to my knees on the spot. A severe pain ran through my body from my stomach to my head and toes and it was impossible to breathe. I couldn’t even scream. Something warm came rushing into my hand, which I had immediately lifted to hold my stomach. The stench of blood greeted my nose.

..I...was stabbed..

I thought so in surprise with my mind that was paralyzed with pain. When I fearfully checked to make sure, there wasn’t even a scar there. There wasn’t one stain on the outside of my t-shirt.

“Mai! Are you okay!?”

“What... is this?”

Following the initial impact, the pain had left without me noticing. Staring blankly, the white thing came flying towards my shoulder as well. I tried to avoid

it this time, but I didn't make it in time. A soundless scream came out. It was scorching pain. Suddenly, there was the sensation of blood splashing against my face. It felt like... my upper arm had been twisted and dislocated from the socket.

...It was simply pure pain. Of course, there weren't any scars anywhere.

"Mai!?"

"Don't touch the white things!"

Distracted by me, Bou-san was attacked by a white thing and staggered violently.

"...ow"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not at all okay… shit."

Bou-san joined his fingers.

"Kyataya hanjasa hadaya sowaka!"

Suddenly, the color red flooded my mind. Crimson… transparent light. It wasn't seen with my eyes, but I sensed light. After the light disappeared, there wasn't even one white thing left.

"It's over now... go on. Protect the little kids."

"Right!"

I ran and rushed over to the side of Teruka-san, who was leading Wakako-chan by the hand.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes..."

Teruka-san, who answered with a tense expression, was also covered in thin cuts. Wakako-chan had a dazed expression. I lifted Wakako-chan and ran. I feverishly ran down the dark corridor back towards base.

7

Upon returning to base and going inside, there was a strange feeling like caressing downy hair. It wasn't a particularly unpleasant feeling. Once inside, I lowered Wakako-chan and sat down. I was out of breath, and I couldn't move anymore. Both my hands and feet were trembling.

Bou-san soon rushed in as well and, with a thud, fell on top of the tatami mat where he had entered the room.

"Are you… okay...?"

"I'm dying."

It was a carefree voice, but his breathing seemed like he was suffering terribly.

"Are you alright?"

Masako hurried over and tried to help him up. Bou-san refused it and simply wiggled his fingertips.

"I wouldn't mind paying 100 million yen… if I you'd let me sleep right here."

What are you saying?

I glanced at the doorway. Both the lattice and sliding doors were open at the dark entrance. The white things were flying over again from the corridor, but they seemed to be repulsed at the entrance. I dragged my trembling legs and closed the sliding door. Watching them is bad for the heart.

"You should rest a little. It seems to be all right now."

"If I rest, that barrier will be dispelled, too."

...oh, is that so?

Without noticing, the curtains had been tightly closed over the veranda window and there was a low table propped up there. It was like a simple barricade. Several candles were lit. I would have never thought such small lights

could feel as warm as this.

“Hey... what do we do now?”

“We wait until morning. They should go away at dawn.”

I reflexively looked at my wristwatch. It was already close to one o’clock. Since dawn is early in the summer, we’d be able to hold out somehow.

“What about Naru? Is he okay?”

After I asked, Lin-san nodded.

“He’s fine. He wasn’t woken up.”

Ayako, Masako and Yasuhara were treating all the wounds.

“Taniyama-san, also. Are you injured?”

I was called by Masako and looked at my opened cuts. The blood had already clotted. They didn’t seem like such deep cuts.

“Mine aren’t serious. I’m okay.”

“Well, it’s only disinfection.”

...I don’t like it because it stings. I thought this, but I quietly had them treated. Yasuhara-san kneeled beside Bou-san.

“Are you injured, Takigawa-san?”

“A bunch.”

“Please don’t move for a moment.”

Bou-san’s t-shirt had become covered in blood. When Yasuhara-san attempted to raise Bou-san’s shirt, “Pervert.”

“Would you like me to pour the hydrogen peroxide over your head?”

“I wouldn’t like it because I’d be heavy metal.”

Yasuhara-san laughed and pulled up his shirt forcefully. His back was covered in cuts of various sizes. The ones visible below his shoulder blades were especially deep. At this rate, he should be covered in blood. Yasuhara-san momentarily frowned, but he immediately spoke as if it was nothing.

“This will sting.”

After saying this, he applied the cotton wool and Bou-san raised a pathetic voice.

“Ow, ow, ow.”

“You’re a boy. Endure it!”

“I’ll be a girl starting today.”

“You’re grossing me out, so please stop.”

While speaking of one thing or another, Yasuhara-san disinfected Bou-san’s wounds, then tore sheets and bandaged him. After a while, Lin-san looked up unexpectedly.

“What’s wrong?”

“It has returned.”

“Eh?”

“My shiki. Now all five are present. Takigawa-san, it is safe to sleep.”

I didn’t see anything with my eyes and I didn’t feel anything.

Masako frowned.

“That is your shiki?”

“It is, but can you sense its presence?”

Masako nodded.

“I understand why the spirits in this house were so empty.”

What?

“The ones who possessed Hazuki-chan and Naru, as well as the ones wandering the house, every one of the spirits felt so empty because they are the enslaved spirits of someone.”

Masako’s hands, which were clasped together, were trembling.

“Those spirits are not acting of their own will. Someone is using them, enslaving them as shiki. Using their resentment… using their deep suffering to

the extent that they are unable to rest in peace.”

...Nao-san passing through the cave. If that’s the rebirth ritual, then what is it for? Why was Nao-san participating in the attack? ...with such… a pitiful appearance.

It’s not over yet. Nothing is over until...

We have to cut off this grotesque root and release the trapped spirits.

Chapter 6 - God Approaching

1

After that, along with low voices chanting sutras outside the room, the sounds of banging and the scratching of something continued until dawn. When it finally quieted down and I looked outside from a gap in the curtains, the sky had become faintly bright.

“Well, shall we work a little more?”

I was surprised upon hearing Bou-san’s voice.

“Why don’t you sleep more?”

I know, in the end, without removing the barrier, Bou-san served as a barricade and mostly didn’t sleep. He was finally about to doze off just now.

“I can’t do that. I have to hurry.”

“Why? Won’t it also be okay after it becomes daytime?”

“I wish I could wait, but I can’t. It isn’t necessarily safe because it’s daytime, and if we don’t settle it quickly, there’s no telling what will happen. If we’re attacked again tonight like we were last night, it’s unlikely I can handle them again in this condition.”

...yeah.

“Lin-san, you stay here. I’m going to remove the barrier since it weakens my energy.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, shall we go?”

“But, where are you going?”

When I asked, Bou-san laughed.

“The ‘Sanroku mounds’, of course. You heard the voices chanting sutras,

right?”

...ah.

John nodded at Bou-san’s voice.

“And the three were using the spirits gathered around here as enslaved spirits.”

“It’s not only the gathered spirits. It’s also probably the five from the riot who were beheaded and the princess and her lover from the legend. All the spirits of the people who died roughly around this area, I think they’re all being enslaved as shiki.”

“That’s a staggering amount.”

Bou-san shrugged his shoulders as if fed up.

“Sort of.”

“You should sleep.”

It was Ayako who firmly said that all of a sudden.

“Then, are you saying we leave it to John alone? John is tired, too!”

“I’ll do it.”

Bou-san sighed.

“I hate to say it, but it’s impossible for you.”

“Look, I can do it!”

“Say that after you’ve been more useful.”

Actually, that’s true. But, there was something she said last night. There being conditions or something…

“There were circumstances up till now. I can do it this time. Leave it to me and both you and John go to bed. You’re unsteady on your feet.”

“Do you think I’ll say, ‘Yes, very well,’ and go to sleep?”

John stopped Bou-san, who was going to say something further.

“Why don’t we accept Matsuzaki-san’s kind offer and leave it to her?”

“John, wait a sec.”

John looked at Ayako and smiled.

“However, I do not know what will happen, so may I go along as a measure of precaution? I’ll just watch since I’m very tired.”

“You don’t trust me, huh?”

“I think there’s a difference between trust and irresponsible neglect.”

After frowning slightly, Ayako sighed.

“Even though I was offering out of kindness...”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not like you have to apologize to me. How ridiculous.”

...what? What’s with this confidence suddenly??

***

A morning fog was drifting outside. We left cautiously just in case, however, there were no signs in particular of an oncoming attack. The shop building was in terrible condition. The corridor walls were mostly chipped, and there were spots left on the pillars as well as the floor and ceiling as if they had been struck with an axe.

Still being cautious, we headed for the shrine. There was also a fog drifting around the small compound of the shrine. In the distance, birds were chirping peacefully. It felt bizarre.

The ‘Sanroku mounds’ were also immersed within the fog. Ayako was holding a single bottle of sake and just the branch of a sakaki tree, which had a bell attached to it.

“Ayako, can you really do it?”

When I asked, Ayako laughed confidently.

“I’m telling you, leave it to me. There’s no place better than this.”

“Place?”

“...Yes.”

Ayako looked over the compound.

“Although it’s small, faith securely remains. The trees are also alive.”

“The trees?”

Ayako nodded. She scattered sake on the roots of the compound’s trees.

“There was a large camphor tree in front of my parents’ home.”

...oh?

“A wonderful one with a sacred rope tied around it. It taught me various things from the time when I was little.”

After saying this, Ayako frowned slightly.

“When I was little, since it would even inform me of the time of death of the patients that came to the hospital, I would get scolded every time I told my parents.”

“...really?”

“To tell the truth, I don’t think I have that much power. Still, I am a miko.”

Ayako erected the sakaki in front of the mounds. There was a clear jingling sound.

“I will begin.”

She put her hands together.

“I reverently offer this prayer for thy presence…”

I was sure it was the same prayer Ayako always did, but even so, it was much simpler than usual. And yet, it seemed like something profound, which was completely different. It was likely that Ayako’s own aura was different.

Ayako smoothly proceed with the ritual, her hands folded in prayer,

“Hail, I pray to thee, descend here before us and grant thy protection.”

After chanting, she put her fingers together. She was using the formal method for cutting the nine syllables, not the fast version.

“Rin...”

There was a clear chime from somewhere as if in response. I looked around the area. There were no silhouettes in the compound, which was heavy with fog.

“Pyō...”

There was a chime once again. Something shook right nearby. Each time Ayako cut one of the nine syllables, a clear sound responded.

“Over there...”

When I looked in the direction John was pointing, a figure drifted out from the trunk of a large tree. I watched it in astonishment. Figures drifted out from the trees here and there. They were faint shadows, but I knew they were people. There were many old men with beards grown long.

Those men, who had quietly gathered, walked calmly towards the sakaki. Whenever they reached the side of the sakaki, they would vanish. The sakaki’s bell shook each time and made a sound.

After watching the last one disappear, Ayako carefully formed the sword seal. She began cutting the air, five horizontal and four vertical.

I watched it while being strangely impressed and noticed there was still a silhouette in the distance.

“Aya...”

When I tried to call out, Bou-san stopped me.

“But..”

“Shh...”

But still, it remained. When I thought so and focused my eyes on the silhouette, I realized that it wasn’t one of the old men from the trees. It pushed its way through the morning fog and walked calmly closer. Each time the figure swayed, there was the sound of water lapping. When I noticed it, the sound repeated throughout our entire surroundings.

I soon knew who the one approaching was. His neck was broken and bent...there was no doubt that it was Kazuyasu-san.

Ayako bowed her head deeply and picked up the sakaki.

“Now, the time for all of you to rest has come.”

Suddenly, the figure of a person rushed from the shadows. The stench of salt water assailed my nose. Ayako shook the sakaki faster than Bou-san could form the sword seal. The bell rang and the figure that had rushed over vanished into the fog.

From there, our jaws just dropped and we could do nothing but watch. The spirits of the dead approached Ayako as if drawn in— it was like they were completely unaware of the rest of us— they would vanish just from the ringing of the sakaki.

She also shook the sakaki toward Kazuyasu-san. For a moment, as he was disappearing, Kazuyasu-san’s appearance returned to its original state, then he dissolved into the fog.

“Sure enough… we weren’t needed...”

Bou-san said suddenly. I nodded. While watching, I noticed something. The spirits of the dead weren’t gathering to attack Ayako. They were… gathering to be saved by her…

There was nothing dangerous about them. At last, black shadows flickered out from the mounds, however, they also just hung their heads at the ring of the sakaki and vanished.

After the figures ceased to approach, Ayako shook the sakaki toward the mounds to finish up. At the same time as the ringing sound, the three mounds cracked, making a noise.

Ayako erected the sakaki in front of them. When she placed her hands together, making a noise, the bell untied itself and fell. —With that, everything was completely over.

2

“Incredible… why did you hide that you have such tremendous power?”

When I asked on the way back, Ayako replied, “I wasn’t particularly hiding it. You see, until now, there were no trees that were living. I always said the conditions were bad.”

“Well, I just thought you were being a sore loser.”

“Even if I explained the situation, you would think I was being a sore loser, right?”

Actually, that’s true…

“It has to be a purified location with living trees. Although, it doesn’t particularly have to be a shrine. All the same, the city shrines are full of leaves and other trash and when it comes to the trees, even the old ones are like mummies. I think the world is beyond saving when I see that.”

Bou-san and John looked mystified. ...I certainly understood the feeling.

“It was good that the mounds happened to be in the compound this time, but what if they weren’t?”

“If it’s in the vicinity, I can call that far. The five who died during the time of the riots were also there, right?”

“They were there?”

“Yes, they were there. There were five spirits without heads. —Should I take you there now?”

“That time when you exorcised Eijirou-san, we should have brought him to the shrine.”

“It’s pointless to even do that to a human being. If it’s just a spirit, there are no spirits that can’t be purified. Besides, if I rely on a tree once, then I have to let it

rest for half a year. If I had asked a tree for help at that point, then it would have been useless at the critical moment, wouldn't it? I knew it would be expelled if John came."

...hmm. I don't know why, but it's cool. My view of her has already completely changed. From now on, I will call her Ayako-sama. Uh-huh.

"Well, the matter is settled now."

"Not yet."

At Ayako's frank words, Bou-san, John, and I all involuntarily stopped short.

"What…?"

I take back what I just said. She's Ayako.

"I said if it's a spirit. There's something here that isn't a spirit."

"What did you say?"

Bou-san frowned.

"When I was performing the purification, there was a force that absolutely wouldn't come near. If it was a spirit, it should have come seeking purification; therefore, that wasn't a spirit. I don't know what it is, but it's a much greater force. I think that force is what was enslaving all those spirits as shiki."

"It wasn't the spirits of the Rokubu?"

"That wasn't the case. I think the three Rokubu were just shiki, too. Even Masako had said it was 'sacred ground', hadn't she? For the spirits to gather in swarms like they did, it would have to be because there's a special power there, right? Even Nao-san's spirit called it a 'monster.'"

...that's true.

"Then… there's only one force such as that."

When Bou-san spoke, John nodded.

"I agree."

Eh? What is it?

"It's 'Okobu-sama'. There's nothing else."

“Did you say, ‘Okobu-sama’...?”

“The driftwood that washed ashore from the sea. Because its shape resembled a Buddha statue, a shrine was built and it was enshrined. —It’s an ‘Ebisu’. A magnificent ‘Marebito’.”

Bou-san said, then made a bitter expression.

“I should have slept like Ayako advised. It appears we have to deal with a god.”

***

On the way back, just in case, we went to examine the state of the mounds of the five people. Somewhat similar to the Sanroku mounds, the five mounds were also cleanly broken as if they had been sliced. The sacred shrine rope on Okobu and Mekobu had also been cut, and was drifting on the waves.

After that, we returned to base in succession, and then it was Bou-san who raised his voice first.

“...Yo. Long time no see.”

Inside was Akifumi-san and his family, who were soundly asleep, and Yasuhara-san, who was struggling with a bunch of copies. Lin-san was replaying the video, and furthermore, supervising that was— Naru.

I was strangely moved when I saw his jet-black eyes, which stared back at Bou-san.

The spirit possessing Naru should have been one of the enslaved spirits, and the enslaved spirits were completely purified, so if you think about it, it’s no mystery that Naru woke up.

“Ah, Shibuya-san, I’m glad you’re safe.”

John smiled.

Naru looked coldly at Bou-san and John waving their hands, then turned his face back to the screen.

...a touching reunion— fail. What’s the deal?

Maybe he doesn’t remember anything? It could be a possibility, but I can’t imagine that Lin-san didn’t explain anything. Besides, there’s video evidence of

him strangling Ayako.

“I want you to thank me. I forgot my past grudge and helped you, you know.”

Naru didn’t even turn his gaze at Ayako’s absolutely disagreeable tone.

“Thank you.”

It was a completely indifferent reply. Yasuhara-san uncomfortably exchanged a look with us. When we stealthily approached his side, he spoke with a quiet voice, “He’s in a horrible mood.”

He grumbled such.

..what a selfish guy. That’s the whole problem with narcissists.

Bou-san cleared his throat with a cough, “Well, it looks like the source of the curse isn’t the Rokubu.”

When Bou-san said this, Naru replied in a brusque voice, “It’s ‘Okobu-sama’.”

We stared at Naru blankly.

“...how do you know?”

“My brain works differently than yours.”

..urgh. What’s with your manner of speaking! When you’ve been sleeping this whole time!

Just as I thought of voicing one of these complaints, Yasuhara-san spoke up.

“Here it is!”

Naru glanced towards Yasuhara-san.

“The contents?”

“Well, according to the contents of ‘The Cursing Patron God’, a certain shrine’s goshintai, ‘Okoboshi-sama’, would curse if it failed to be worshipped. Since ‘Okoboshi-sama’ is an ‘Ebisu’ god, it’s probably about ‘Okobu-sama’. It’s said that ever since ‘Okoboshi-sama’ has been worshipped, storms and high waves have ceased. Because of that, it was worshipped exuberantly, but if the villagers and iwai failed to worship it, then it would immediately cause a disaster. In particular, many people from the iwai household would die as retribution.”

“Matsuzaki-san, what’s an iwai?”

“Iwai…? Oh, it’s talking about a hafuri. It’s like a priest.”

Naru nodded. Bou-san spoke timidly,

“What does it mean...?”

Naru looked over us with cold-hearted eyes.

“There’s a shrine and there’s a cave behind it. That place is where dead bodies drift to. There is a small shrine and an ‘Ebisu’ called ‘Okobu-sama’ enshrined there. From the cave towards the direction of the shrine there is a path that is carved in the steep cliff, and there is an old stone stairway. —Why was such immense construction done? Naturally, they decided to do it because of a purpose. Why would they carry out such immense construction merely for the sake of a boring cave. Of course it’s because that shrine’s goshintai is there. They were forced to do it for that reason.”

...ah.

“Moreover, if it was an insignificant god, they wouldn’t have done that. The being enshrined in that shrine is a god possessing power great enough to make them do that.”

“I see. Then, that’s the current legend?”

“That’s right. I expected there to be a legend around this area about a god possessing great power. That’s why I had the documents looked over again. That’s what Yasuhara-san just finished reading.”

Naru said, then looked around at us.

“‘Okobu-sama’ is an ‘Ebisu’ god, and furthermore, it frequently calmed the disasters of the sea. However, it’s also a malicious god that curses if it fails to be worshipped. That shrine, which is considered to be dedicated to ‘Okobu-sama’, is now separated from the small shrine. This house is what’s separating them. In all likelihood, this was originally part of the shrine. It would be logical to assume the compound was sold off in pieces.”

...certainly.

“If the shrine had a hafuri, he would have lived near the shrine. Wouldn’t that

probably be here?”

“Probably.”

“The place where the hafuri lived was divided when the tomb was built for the five ringleaders of the riot— that would be a reasonable conjecture. Moreover, it was resold as a private house.”

—In other words, this location was where the hafuri lived a long time ago…?

“‘Okobu-sama’ believes that the inhabitant of this house is the priest that should worship it. Because the one who should be worshipping it isn’t worshipping it, that person is cursed. The current folklore is evidence of this. So, although the household wasn’t necessarily excluded while the fury of the curse was wielded, not everyone was killed. It deliberately left behind survivors since a priest is necessary in order for it to be worshipped.”

It’s more anticlimactic than amazing. When it’s taken up by Naru, the situation becomes clear like this…

Naru looked around at us.

“We’re going to perform an exorcism on ‘Okobu-sama’.”

Bou-san interrupted.

“Wait a minute. Do we need to exorcise it?”

“Of course.”

“But, don’t they just have to worship it?”

“It will repeat the same thing again if it isn’t worshiped.”

“Still, isn’t it okay for the time being? Even though we’re dealing with an ‘Ebisu’, it is a type of god. It’s worse than a monster. You’re the one who said there’s no way to hunt a monster.”

Naru smiled. It was a thoroughly disturbing and magnificent smile.

“Are you saying to overlook that thing? No way.”

“Oi!”

“It gave us so many pleasant experiences. It would be a courtesy to properly

return the favor.”

...he’s angry. I would call this furious.

“Or do you want to retire?”

Ayako hurriedly waved her hand in response to Naru’s gaze.

“I...I can’t do it. There’s no tree over there.”

Naru’s cold gaze turned towards John.

“Me, too… I can do it if it's a possessing spirit, but I don’t know about an ‘Ebisu’.”

“Lin?”

Lin-san shook his head.

“I do not think I can compete with it. —Naru, you ought to leave it alone. That being is beyond our powers.”

Naru flatly ignored Lin-san.

“Bou-san?”

Bou-san’s expression was extremely disgruntled.

“I could give it a try, but Naru-chan, in this case, we should do what Lin says...”

“I don’t need anyone who’s incompetent.”

Saying so, there isn’t anyone among us with a personality amiable enough to withdraw (Except John. However, John won’t withdraw due to his kind personality.) In the end, we all nodded.

3

We made arrangements while we waited for low tide.

“Um… you needn’t force yourself to do it. Since we understand the source of the curse, we only need to worship it with great respect from now on.”

Akifumi-san told us this. With a bitter expression, Bou-san replied, “Naru-bou’s overtaking his rival. Anyway, we just have to try.”

“But...”

“Well, personally, it’s also about what happened to Nao-san and Kazuyasu-san. If I can return the blow, then I feel that I want to do it.”

Akifumi-san deeply bowed his head.

After that, Bou-san said,

“Shōnen and Masako, Ayako, Mai, stay. What are you going to do, John?”

He said so while Naru wasn’t present. John replied, “I don’t think I’ll even be useful, but I’ll go anyway.”

“I’m going, too.”

When I said this, Bou-san lightly glared at me.

“You’ll get in the way. Don’t come. I don’t think I can protect you.”

...when it’s said so frankly, I’ll argue, but…

When I cast my eyes downward, Yasuhara-san interjected.

“Each person will look out for themselves. Right, Taniyama-san?”

“...eh?”

“By the way, I will also go.”

Bou-san opened his mouth with shock.

“Shōnen!”

“It can’t be stopped. It’s already been decided. Don’t worry. I’ll look after myself, and if I think it’s dangerous, I’ll escape before Takigawa-san.”

Bou-san argued harshly, but he was unable to obtain Yasuhara-san’s consent.

“I wash my hands of you.”

Yasuhara-san waved at the robes of Bou-san, who gave a parting threat and left, then looked at us.

“Everyone, please come, too, if at all possible.”

Masako, Ayako, and I all stared openmouthed.

“Hold on, boy, this is...”

Yasuhara-san made a serious expression.

“I know this isn’t a game. They need a rescue team.”

“Rescue… team?”

When I asked, Yasuhara-san nodded.

“You saw their injuries last night, right?”

“...oh.”

“I think Takigawa-san’s back is still bleeding. Since the wounds were so deep. He’ll probably need stitches. They aren’t wounds that can be held together with just bandages. Brown-san also has a deep wound on his arm. It isn’t as bad as Takigawa-san’s, but I think it will need stitches, too.”

I looked at John and Bou-san, who started talking in the distance.

Bou-san was in his Buddhist priest robes and John was also in his Catholic priest uniform. Both outfits were black and I more or less couldn’t really tell if they were bleeding.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if the shrine was somewhere an ambulance was able to come alongside if called, but how will they return to the coast if they collapse? It’s unlikely that Shibuya-san and Lin-san will be able to bring them back. If we don’t go, we won’t let them go either. ...How about it?”

Ayako looked up to the sky.

“...good grief, men… Naru, Bou-san and John, there’s really no helping them!”

“Right?”

To Yasuhara-san, who nodded nonchalantly, “You, too! When you can’t even to use a single one of the nine syllables!”

“Ahahaha.”

Masako sighed.

“Both Takigawa-san and Brown-san say they will go if Naru goes. And I do not think Naru will stay… You should have seen his face when he woke up.”

“Was it terrible…?”

I guess his pride is shattered.

“I understand Matsuzaki-san’s feelings well. I thought that he was still possessed.”

...is that so?

“There is no choice when it comes to this... Mai.”

Eh!? “Mai”?

“Could you lend me some clothes? This type of clothing is out of the question in case of an emergency.”

“...No problem...”

Ah, I was surprised…

While returning with Masako to get the change of clothes, I grinned slightly. Masako disapproved.

“Is it that strange for me to wear western style clothes?”

“Well, there’s also that.”

“There is? What on earth is it?”

“Hmm...”

“Mai!”

I smiled.

“See, you used my name without an honorific.”

Masako covered her mouth in surprise. She looked at me petulantly and said, “...do you disapprove? You use my name without honorifics.”

“Yup. So you can keep doing it ♡”

Masako glowered.

“I like being called without honorifics. It makes you feel closer, right?”

“...perhaps that’s true.”

“A while ago you would call me by my last, right? Recently, don’t you occasionally use my first name without honorifics? I’m happy with the change in sentiment.”

Masako looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

“It does not mean we are familiar with each other.”

“Sure.”

“It’s what you call fellow sufferers sympathizing with each other.”

Fellow sufferers?

Masako released a sigh.

“We both chose a difficult person.”

“...is that so?”

Umm, hello, that is it, right…?

Unconcerned by me, who was flustered, Masako said, “When I saw Naru after he woke up, I felt sorry for myself and wondered, ‘Why this person?’ However you think about it, someone like Takigawa-san or Yasuhara-san or Brown-san would be preferable.”

“...you can say that again.”

We sighed amicably.

“It would also be much easier to converse as well. But, I suppose I should say it

cannot be helped.”

“Let’s call it something strange.”

“It really is, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, really.”

Once again, we sighed together, and then burst into giggles after that.

—Has a friendship unexpectedly happened from a ill-natured sweetheart?

4

We waited for low tide, then went to the cave. The cave where the ‘Ebisu’ had come. The sacred ground where there was a cursing god.

Seeing us, who said we would accompany them, Naru looked unhappy to the fullest. Truly bad personality!

The cave was deathly quiet. There was the scent of the tide and the sound of waves echoing throughout the cavity.

“Hey, Ayako.”

I unconsciously whispered since the sound resonated well.

“...hmm?”

“All of the enslaved spirits were cleansed, right?”

“They should be...”

I felt slightly deflated by her uneasy tone.

“No way, don’t tell me you failed with that.”

“I don’t mean that I failed. But if it can truly calm things like storms and high waves, it might be easy for it to bring back the purified spirits.”

“Wa—wait...”

“We can’t be careless. It is more or less a ‘god’.”

Masako murmured.

“It is safe. At least, they are not here right now. As before, it feels like sacred ground, but… very empty sacred ground...”

As we lapsed into silence, there was only the sound of the waves. It was a truly empty place.

Naru’s merciless voice resounded.

“Let’s get started.”

Bou-san exhaled once, then stood in front of the shrine and opened the doors. The figure of the strangely shaped driftwood appeared. There was a simple altar in front of the shrine. Bou-san formed a seal, chanted a mantra and built an invisible temple herein. A barrier descended and the temple was built, then he summoned a Buddha there. I gathered that this was the prayer that Bou-san always did. The invisible temple was made from his energy. Therefore, if Bou-san were to lose consciousness, it would disappear immediately…

“On bazara gini harachi hataya sowaka.”

Something gave off a sound from somewhere. The quiet, short sound disappeared soon after I strained my ears to listen. I heard it again before I could ask Ayako if she didn’t hear something just now. I could hear it a little more clearly now. The low sound came briefly, then disappeared again. When it sounded for the third time, Ayako and Masako also looked around.

“...what’s that sound?”

“How should I know?”

I could hear it again as we whispered together. It gradually became clear. That unmistakable, low, low evenly spaced sound.

“This is...”

“The sound of a heart…?”

It was certainly beating. It was the sound of an internal organ expanding and contracting.

“Over there…!”

Called out by Masako, I looked in the direction she was pointing. Then I saw the cave wall moving slightly. The rock surface was very slightly pulsing in accordance with the beating. It had a smooth gloss that did not seem like rock… It was considerably dark inside here. I cautiously tried approaching the wall. I gently reached out my hand.

“Stop it, Mai!”

But, if I touched it, I would know. Is this an illusion or something different...?

My fingertips touched it. The point where I touched had a rough and hard feel. Although I was sure beyond a doubt that it was rock, it was very warm.

“This...”

The beating sound became even louder. Every time it sounded, the surrounding walls trembled. Mixed with the beating, I could hear the sound of low breathing. It felt like we had entered the belly of a huge creature.

“Takigawa-san!”

It was Yasuhara-san who suddenly cried out. Bou-san looked back.

“The entrance is starting to close!”

I hurriedly looked between the entrances of the coast side and the cove side. They were undoubtedly more narrow than when we came in. Already, the width that remained at the entrance of the cove side was only enough for a single person to pass through.

“Kyataya hanjasa hadaya sowaka!”

A red light quickly flowed into my field of vision. It rushed through the inside of the cave, however, the state of the closed entrance did not change. Nevertheless, the movement, which was in the process of closing at a visible rate, came to a dead stop.

“It’ll open naturally if we stop the source. Don’t worry about that.”

Naru’s voice spoke calmly.

The openings that remained at both the coast side and the cove side were only enough for a person to turn sideways and barely pass through. I stared at it for a while. I couldn’t help but confirm that it wasn’t moving or closing any further and we wouldn’t be trapped in here.

The beating sound continued. The sound of breathing also continued. Then, at that juncture, a loud sound joined the others. It was a sound resembling someone shouting something in the distance somewhere. It was the voices of many people shouting at the top of their voice’s with a scream. Though I looked around, there weren’t any figures. The voices were echoing in a place that was somewhere separated by something thick. Probably on the opposite side of the

cave wall.... and now they drew nearer.

I closed my eyes tightly. There was a dark hole on the opposite side of the wall, and from within that, a large number of dead people were shouting as they drew nearer— I drove away that illusion. They came even closer. They would be here soon…

“In the beginning was the Word.”

John spoke. He connected his fingers and closed his eyes.

“The Word was with God. The Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things were made by the Word. Without the Word was not any thing made that was made...”

The voices that came across the wall halted.

Just as I sighed in relief, Naru spoke sternly.

“Bou-san, the prayer.”

“...Right.”

Bou-san said and continued his mantra. At the same time, a pale light began to illuminate the surface of the wall. Faint light, which shined dimly, seeped out onto the surface of the wall and formed pale human faces. One after another they rose to the surface here and there, and it seemed as though a countless number of masks were lined up. The faces appeared clearly, opened their mouths, and began to shout. Furthermore, two arms leisurely came out from beneath each face and went forward. The inside of the cave was filled with voices similar to screams.

“Naumaku sanmanda bazara dankan!”

The faces that had risen to the surface near Bou-san disappeared. Following this, Lin-san whistled with his fingers. Ayako and I cut the nine syllables and…

The inside of my mind was filled with the thought, “You should run away.” I remembered what happened when the base was attacked. If we cut the nine syllables, the faces would disappear for the time being, however, they would resurface shortly in that case and it would repeat. Even if we were to do that, it would be endless. We would inevitably become worn out…

A red light flowed through the inside of the cave once again. My eyes opened wide in astonishment as a transparent red color extended over my entire field of view. When it disappeared, I couldn't see any of the faces that had emerged on a great deal of the wall's surface.

That was Bou-san just now. When I thought this and looked back, Bou-san was just preparing his Tokkosho. He threw it into the shrine. It struck into the driftwood.

"Tari tsuta boritsu hara boritsu takimei takimei kara santan uenbi sowaka!"

At the same time as he finished speaking, Bou-san was blown back by some kind of force.

"Bou-san!"

"Takigawa-san!"

We rushed over and helped up Bou-san, who had fallen to the bottom of the wall.

"Are...are you okay!?"

"Oww…"

Yeah, I should think so.

"John. I'm sorry, but that Tokkosho..."

After this was said by Bou-san, John looked at the shrine.

"Break the driftwood with that."

"Right!"

With a shout, John ran up to the shrine. He pulled out the Tokkosho and raised it overhead. Before he had time to pierce the driftwood, John was flung back this time and crashed beside Bou-san.

"John! —Yasuhara-san!"

Yasuhara-san broke into a run instead. He picked up the Tokkosho dropped by John and rushed toward the shrine. Now Yasuhara-san slammed into the wall.

...it's completely useless. There's nothing we can do about it.

“Yasuhara-san, are you okay?”

“...owowow. Well, somehow… I’m alive.”

At that time, a sickening calm voice resounded.

“Is that all?”

Naru turned his gaze toward Bou-san. His eyes were cold.

...I’m...I’m angry!!

“Knock it off!!!”

Naru turned his gaze toward me.

“What are you so worked up about!? Bou-san and everyone else already reached their limit saving you!! Why does everyone have to go so far just for the sake of your pride!?”

Naru only frowned.

“Even your pride is worthless! Don’t you think it’s ridiculous!? If your own pride is so important, why don’t you do it yourself without relying on others!? You have others protect you, so how much can that pride be worth!!?”

Ahhh, I’m furious! This guy!!

Naru looked at me expressionlessly.

“...That’s a just argument.”

Hmph. I won.

The beating sound and sound of breathing was still resounding in the cave. And the shouts of people could be heard from far away. I looked at the cave entrance. Somehow it was not a width where we would be trapped inside.

“Bou-san, are you okay?”

“I don’t seem very okay.”

“Let’s go. It’s enough… already.”

I led Bou-san by the hand. As I pulled, Bou-san raised his body.

“Naru-chan, sorry. I’m at my limit.”

Naru didn't reply. Lin-san helped me lift Bou-san. John stood and supported Bou-san beneath his arm. Masako and Ayako lifted Yasuhara-san.

"Well, we're going back."

Lin-san and John supported Bou-san's arms and began to leave. Naru had his back turned, oblivious of that. His gaze was fixed— toward the shrine.

"Naru?"

Though I called, he didn't look back. The others, who had begun to hurry towards the entrance, looked back.

"Naru!?"

Lin-san shouted and quickly tried to turn back. John lost his balance and Bou-san nearly fell over, but he hastily stood firm in place.

"Naru! Don't do it!!"

Naru didn't look back. He advanced towards the shrine. His hair lightly drifted up as if he was encircled by a gentle breeze.

—What?

Just as I thought this, there was a ringing in my ears. I heard a low sound as if there were small insects or something flying deep within my ears. I quickly reached out my hand. Just as I touched Naru's arm in an attempt to hold him back, something repelled my fingertips.

"Ow…!"

It was like strong static electricity. Like what occurs when you touch metal during dry weather midwinter. There was a violent striking sound and something solid caused a splitting pain against my fingertips.

What is this?

Naru stood directly facing the shrine.

What is that?

The air was distorted.

The air surrounding Naru's body was clearly distorted as if a heat haze was

rising from his body. It was rapidly thickening. The distortion immediately began spreading. Naru clenched his lowered right hand into a fist and grasped the wrist with his left hand. His stance looked like he was trying to accumulate something in the tip of his fist. Then, the air began to bend and warp around his fist at a visible speed.

Suddenly, I felt something strange on my skin. Like when the little hairs on your body bristle just as your hair rises up. It was similar to that. That feeling when static electricity happens… like when plastic sheets are brought close and rubbed together. I felt a gentle wind. It was something like an air flow rather than a wind.

Even the air around me was distorted. Everything looked shaken and distorted as if looking through warped glass or the inside of water.

“What is this?”

Naru had raised his hand just before I spoke. The distortion ended and a mass of congealed air dripped from the inside of his fist. That’s what it looked like. Lin-san spoke, but the ringing in my ears was intense and I couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Suddenly, Naru swung down his arm. The air broke from the top of his fist. — That’s what it looked like. A fissure was made in the air like a crack in warped glass and the scenery there was completely skewed. The fissure extended and began to spread in the direction in which his arm was swung down. In that moment, the glass filled landscape was torn to pieces and broke. The air crumbled, and the distorted image cracked along with the distorted shrine.

There was a strange feeling of air slowly creeping up from my feet. It caressed my spine, then disappeared.

In actuality, I think it only took about ten seconds from when Naru held his arm until then. After a long, long ten seconds passed, the same scene as before remained. The cave smelled of the tide and we all stood frozen as if rigid like the dark rock surface. Naru remained standing. I couldn’t hear the beating. There was neither breathing nor the voices. Instead, the sound of the waves could be heard.

The shrine remained unchanged with the door still open. However, that was

excluding the driftwood inside there, which was broken. The fragments were scattered inside and around the shrine.

“What happened?”

Naru silently looked back at Bou-san’s weak voice. He had a sardonic smile on his face.

“The presence...”

Masako looked around the inside of the cave.

“The presence has disappeared. This place is no longer sacred ground.”

...eh?

Masako looked at the cave entrance.

“Even the spirits that had been gathered are gone…”

The entrance was completely back to normal, and from the wide open mouth one could see the waves break onto the rocky stretch. The horizon was visible beyond there and a white sky extended above that.

“This place is just a cave.”

“That thing… disappeared?”

Masako nodded.

“I think so. Definitely...”

Bou-san exhaled.

“Right now, I’m full of the desire that you would have done it from the beginning if you were able to exorcise it.”

Naru said nothing. He turned his gaze toward us and started walking.

“Let’s go.”

We looked at each other, then hastily followed him.

5

Helping Bou-san and Yasuhara-san, who were close to sinking to the ground, we went through the rocky stretch and returned to the coast. The tide had gradually risen and the stone path had become submerged to ankle depth. While staggering, we returned to the coast and sat down in the shade where it was dry and the waves could not reach. The pebbles on the beach were warm and I felt extremely relieved when I touched them.

“Bou-san, are you okay?”

I nudged Bou-san, who was exhausted.

“...I’m dying.”

“Pull yourself together.”

“...sleep.”

Yeah, yeah. Yasuhara-san was also crouched. His face had become ghastly pale.

“What about you, Yasuhara-san? Are you okay?”

“Well… it seems like I hit something hard...”

“Is it painful?”

Yasuhara-san looked directly at me.

“It’s terribly painful.”

Uh-oh. Was he joking or was he serious? Either way, immediate action was necessary.

Just as I thought something like that and attempted to stand up, Ayako suddenly cried out.

“Naru!”

When I looked back at her scream, Naru was lying on the beach.

Everyone rushed over. The one who leaped at him first was Lin-san.

...is—is it anemia again?

“Naru!?”

Attempting to lift Naru, Lin-san’s body suddenly stiffened. He immediately laid his face on top of Naru’s chest.

Naru’s face was pale. A faint shadow had visibly formed on his tightly closed eyelids.

“Hey, is he okay!?”

Ignoring Ayako’s screamed question, Lin-san straightened. He placed both his hands on Naru’s chest, applied his body weight, and pushed with all his strength.

If—if you do such a thing, Naru’s whole body will break!

Lin-san pressed his chest a few times in that way, then impatiently withdrew his hands. He grabbed Naru’s collar and swung up one hand.

...Wa—wait, Lin-san!!

Before I could stop him, there was a violent smacking noise. He slapped him mercilessly.

“Naru! Breathe!!”

…what did you just say?

John broke into a run.

“I’ll call an ambulance!”

***

Naru was taken to a nearby emergency hospital and, to our absolute terror, immediately taken to the intensive care unit.

We were forced out of the hospital room and stood dumbfounded in the corridor. Yasuhara-san, who was crouched over, was taken for treatment along with John and Bou-san. The door to the hospital room did not open for a while. Ayako went off somewhere saying she was going to check everyone’s conditions,

and in the end, Masako, Lin-san and I stood there quietly waiting.

If I remain silent, I'll only think about bad things. Just as I was getting sick of my dark thoughts, a doctor at last came out.

"Is someone his proxy?"

That being said, Lin-san went forward.

"It appears to be shock. His pulse is weak, and a considerable arrhythmia is present. His blood pressure is also very low. It resembles a heart attack, but judging from his electrocardiogram, it seems it's not a heart attack. Has he ever had a similar attack before?"

"If it was light, several times. So far, it was the first time it was severe."

"During his illness, was there any fever?"

"There was none."

"Then, does he have allergies? Was he taking any medicine?"

"No."

"What about an angina attack?"

"There was none."

The doctor hmmed.

"Once the blood pressure elevation medicine is administered, his blood pressure will gradually return to normal. We can assume he is recovering from shock. Since there's concern that complications will occur following this, he'll be hospitalized for the time being and we will watch his progress."

Masako covered her face and crouched on the spot. Seeing that, Lin-san bowed his head to the doctor.

"...Thank you in advance."

"The nurse has an explanation of everything."

After he saw off the doctor, who bowed and left, I pulled on Lin-san's sleeve.

"Is something wrong with Naru?"

"No. There is no specific illness in particular."

“Then… Naru used Qigong, didn’t he? Is that the cause?”

Lin-san’s eyes widened in surprise.

“He fainted before, too. You said it was anemia, but that wasn’t really the case, was it?”

My mother had died in an accident. The cause of death was shock from blood loss. Shock, I know, is a truly terrible condition.

“Did you stop Naru because you knew this would happen?”

Lin-san lightly exhaled.

“...That’s right.”

“Is Qigong such a dangerous technique? You can also cure illness with the technique, right? And yet, why does Naru get like this when he uses it?”

Lin-san patted my shoulders to calm me down.

“Everyone releases ch’i. That is what is known as presence. Usually, it is only released and cannot be used for anything. Qigong is a technique that successfully amplifies that and controls it for a certain purpose. It’s the same as any sport and with enough training, anyone can to do it to a certain extent. However, in Naru’s case, nothing can compare.”

...nothing can compare.

“It’s an innate ability. Naru used to cause poltergeists when he was a child.”

...ah.

“I taught him Qigong for the purpose of controlling the emission of ch’i that was uncontrollable by his own consciousness. Therefore, his style is quite similar to Qigong. However, it’s on a completely different level.”

“Is...that so?”

“Yes. Nevertheless, Naru’s power is too great for a human being. Therefore, if he uses it, his body is unable to keep up.”

“...It’s my fault.”

Tears spilled. However, I think crying at this point is a cowardly thing.

“It’s because I said things in order to provoke him.”

“It was his fault for taking the provocation.”

“But...”

Lin-san laughed slightly.

“Naru knew what would happen. If he was cool-headed, then he would not have taken the provocation like he did. In the first place, he’s not the kind of person to lose his composure. He will be extremely angry with his blunder. The loss of restraint will damage his self-esteem, since his pride is ridiculously high.”

...that’s true, but…

“It’s a foolish thing to risk your life for the sake of pride. When he wakes up, he will realize that. It’s good medicine. —Although, he will probably be in a bad mood for a while.”

“...maybe.”

“Being upset caused him to blunder and draw a sword that should not be drawn. He will be difficult for a while and lose his temper because of his so-called double blunder. If he had also failed in the exorcism, he would have died from indignation.”

I laughed a little.

“...You’re right. —Will he heal properly?”

Lin-san gave me a small smile.

“Of course.”

Epilogue

—The weather is nice today.

After looking up at the sky, I was about to get in the car with everyone else when a voice called out to me.

“Are you going out?”

When I looked toward the voice, Hiroe-obsan was about to serve tea to the plasterer.

“Yes. For a visit.”

“Please be careful.”

The plasterer entered the shop, which had been destroyed here and there, and was now doing the re-plastering of the walls. We had gratefully accepted the Yoshimi family’s offer to use the shop for lodgings since they were unable to open for business for the time being.

The Yoshimi family did not blame us. Despite that they had been through a great deal of suffering. I would probably want to take it out on someone and blame us.

“They’re good people...”

After saying this to no one in particular, Bou-san nodded in agreement.

***

We encountered Akifumi-san, who had just emerged from the entrance of the hospital. Akifumi-san and Yasutaka-san, and then Youko-san.

“Are you visiting?”

He asked and we nodded.

“Yasutaka-san, are you leaving the hospital?”

After I asked, Yasutaka-san politely bowed his head.

“Yes. Thanks to you. We also greeted Shibuya-san and Yasuhara-san just now.”

“Oh, is that so? How is your grandmother?”

The grandmother had inhaled smoke during the small fire and was hospitalized.

“She’s doing well. I think she’ll be able to return home this week.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“Yasuhara-san is also being discharged today. I’m glad they both weren’t serious.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, excuse us for leaving first.”

We saw off the three, who bowed and walked toward the parking lot.

They were good people. They hadn’t done anything bad. The other day, funerals had been held for Kazuyasu-san and Nao-san. Seeing everyone was difficult. It was just painful that Kazuyasu-san’s death became a suicide and Nao-san’s became an accident. Katsuki-kun and Wakako-chan cried. It must be a sad thing to understand it in the way of a child. Hazuki-chan didn’t seem to understand the meaning of a funeral yet. Since Ayako’s purification, her strange rash had also healed and she smiled innocently. It was a little sad.

“Mai, let’s go.”

Being told by Bou-san, I started to walk. Both John and Bou-san had their injuries weaved together (according to Bou-san’s words). Bou-san just finished having his stitches removed yesterday and John the day before yesterday.

“Maybe I’ll become Bou-san’s apprentice.”

“Hmm?”

“Suppose I became your apprentice and trained properly, do you think I could become a somewhat decent exorcist?”

Bou-san ruffled my hair without saying anything.

***

“Mooorning.”

When we opened the door, Naru, who was sitting up in bed and reading a book, looked up.

“Okay, get up.”

“If I return home early, my body will weaken.”

His manner of speaking was blunt. As Lin-san predicted, Naru’s mood had been terrible ever since he regained consciousness. Whatever he said, it was curt.

Ayako lowered a paper bag onto the locker.

“I bought a melon. Do you want to eat it?”

“I don’t want it.”

“Eat it. You lack strength as it is.”

Naru made a disgusted face with all his might, but didn’t say anything in particular. Ayako, who held the trump card, was strong. As Naru started to make a sarcastic remark, he put his hand against his throat and coughed deliberately. This guy!

When Ayako diligently went off to do things like make tea and put the melon in the refrigerator, Bou-san and John, who had gone to Yasuhara-san’s hospital room, came along with the Yasuhara-san in question.

“Congratulations on your discharge from the hospital.”

“Oh, thank you very much.”

Yasuhara-san had been taken to the examination room and it was discovered that he had in fact broken his ribs. After he left the hospital, he developed a high fever on the following day. Eventually, he recovered and was ready for discharge, however, even if he was discharged, he wasn’t really fully recovered.

“Are you going home now?”

When I asked, Yasuhara-san shook his head.

“Although I came here with considerable trouble, it would be boring. Even if I

return to Okinawa after this, I can't work and it's boring to stay at home during summer vacation."

"It turned into an awful summer vacation."

Because we called him.

"Well, thrilling summer vacations are the most interesting."

"Interesting?"

"Oh, yes. Because it's the end of it when you brag about being a part-timer at a resort hotel once during a party. In this regard, I can brag about participating in evil spirit purification and honorable injuries of battle until I become an old man."

Well, that is true.

"This feat of arms will be forever handed down. Uh-huh."

We laughed at Yasuhara-san, who was nodding to himself.

"That's why,"

Yasuhara-san said and pulled out a small book.

"What is it?"

"A Tourist map. Let's go out to play."

"Strenuous activities are forbidden, Yasuhara-san."

Because his ribs are broken.

"It's fine. Because if I get tired, Takigawa-san will carry me."

'Ugh,' Bou-san cried out.

"Hey, hey! No way!"

"Well, it was difficult getting to Noto from Okinawa."

"It was interesting, right?"

Yasuhara-san feigned a faltering shocked pose.

"That's awful! I flew here for Norio!"

"Who are you?"

“You treat your noble love harshly.”

“Hey, you!”

Yasuhara-san put both his hands to his chest.

“I think I’m in love. Look, I feel such pain in my chest.”

“Hey!”

“It seems to have tightened, and moreover, it’s unbearably itchy.”

I...itchy?

“On top of that, it’s sweaty… maybe that’s because of the corset.”

It's because of the corset.

Naru stared at us, who were laughing loudly, with a look of amazement.

...it was a nice look.

I sighed internally. When I decided to make barley tea and went out to the corridor, Masako followed after me.

“I will help you.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Actually, Masako and I had become quite familiar with each other. The two of us went to the kitchenette and put the public kettle on the fire.

“Yasuhara-san is also a good person...”

Masako said.

“I know, right?”

“Takigawa-san and Brown-san, also. They were inconvenienced because of Naru, so it would be all right if they got angry, and yet they didn’t blame him at all.”

“Not at all, right?”

No one blamed Naru when he woke up. I thought that at least Bou-san and John had a right to blame him, but even so, not a single word of blame was spoken.

“I really think it should have been one of those three.”

“Absolutely.”

“After behaving in such a selfish and merciless way, Naru ought to feel a little sorry.”

“I know… but it seems Naru apologized.”

Masako looked at me.

“Really?”

“Really. I heard it from Bou-san yesterday. It seems he woke up and apologized first thing.”

With all her might, Masako violently placed down the tea container that she had been fiddling with in her hands.

“I hate that about Naru!”

“Well, it’s better than not apologizing.”

“That's it. If he didn’t apologize like that, he would simply have a bad personality. Even I could give up on him if I thought he was that kind of person. Though it is strange, it is a graceful thing.”

I nodded deeply.

“That's exactly it. Rather than simply having a bad personality, he’s difficult.”

“Right? Even in that cave, Naru did something terrible, so I secretly made up my mind to give up on him. Then he collapsed. I wondered if I could seriously get angry with him after that.”

“...That’s true. I thought so, too.”

“It seems unfair. I can’t keep liking him and I can’t even dislike him.”

“Yes. I wish he would make it clear whether he’s a good guy or a bad guy.”

“Exactly! It seems silly to like him, but it seems wasteful to dislike him. Even so, I hate him.”

...Uh-huh. You can say that again.

So, just like office ladies, we whispered in this way while watching the water

boil, not wanting to be heard by someone nearby.

As we watched the kettle, Masako and I sighed amicably.

“...of all people, it need not be Naru.”

“...indeed.”

Every day, with Masako, we said bad things like this about Naru, so it was somewhat pitiable that the conclusion was always the same in the end.

“Despite thinking so, I cannot give up. After all, it’s to be expected.”

“Isn’t it? Taken advantage of because of love… Oh, I’d like to see the face of the person who becomes Naru’s wife.”

Undoubtedly, it would have to be a gentle person who’s nearly angelic.

“If my face pleases you, you may look at it as much as you want.”

“Oh, is that right? You have high ambitions of wanting to marry Naru, huh?”

“Oh, Mai, you don’t think about that?”

“I don’t think about things that far in the future. For now, I wish I could date him.”

“I went on a date with him.”

This… this girl!

“Well, I’ll be with Naru at the office during the holidays.”

“Lin-san will be there.”

“That’s not always the case.”

Masako glared at me.

“Mai… no unfair advantages.”

“Okay, will you tell me Naru’s weakness?”

“I will not tell you.”

“Well then, I can’t comply with such a pact. In the first place, unfair tactics are an unavoidable part of love.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be a good girl while you play dirty. You can tease me.”

“Is it Cinderella that the prince chooses?”

“That is a universal truth.”

“The perceived personality of the prince is sweet.”

Masako faltered slightly.

“...That’s true.”

“Right?”

We ended up laughing like idiots.